

## Duobus

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## Duobus

by [Cyndi](#)

### Summary

Peace is the war that never happened.

### Notes

The "Ancient" language you see later is actually Latin used incorrectly. I did it on purpose because everything I tried to make up ended up looking too much like Klingon. I wanted something a little softer, so pseudo-Latin became it. The title means "Two" in case you're wondering. :)

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*"What we achieve inwardly will change our outer reality."*

--Otto Rank

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Smoke parted, revealing a single golden optic glowing like a miniature sun.

Death.

Everywhere the optic looked, it saw death.

Optimus Prime had no idea what happened. The last thing he remembered was a wave of light and explosions on the horizon. Then...nothing. He lay still, sprawled facedown amidst complete devastation and emptiness. Everything fell so silent that his own servos created a clamor with each tiny movement he made.

*I seem to be in one piece...*

Optimus rolled onto his back and gazed at the purple haze in the sky. His left optic registered only static. Running a hand over his face told him his left optic and ear finial were broken. A missing antenna didn't matter, he heard nothing beyond a dull hiss over all radio frequencies.

He couldn't say how long he remained supine, dazedly staring up at the undulating clouds drifting overhead while his mind struggled to grasp this new reality. The strange haze appeared high in the outermost atmosphere. He just hoped whatever it was would stay up there a little longer.

It hurt to move, but he forced himself to roll over again. Dust oozed off his frame in small clouds.

Everything had been absolutely *leveled*. Magnificent cities were wiped off the face of Cybertron. Not a single building remained standing--if the air wasn't so full of smoke, dust and ash, Optimus could've seen the whole horizon from his position on the ground.

Panic nibbled on his consciousness. He swallowed it. Getting irrational now would compromise anybody still alive within the rubble. Surely someone survived...entire planets didn't just *die*!

"Optimus Prime to any survivors. Can anybody hear me? Reply to this message. Over!"

Silence.

He risked opening Decepticon channels and repeated the message.

Nothing.

Optimus painfully pushed himself to his feet. Sparks flew off his right knee and he bent to clutch it. Two wires were arcing and all he could do was cover them with the emergency electrical tape he always kept on hand. Red Alert would fix it later.

Then he tripped over Red Alert's *head*.

"Red Alert! No..." Optimus clenched his fists against the emotions welling in his throat. He'd grieve later, when the survival of others no longer depended on him having a clear head. Right now, he had to find out what happened, and why.

He started to walk aimlessly through the ravaged city. Everything smelled like cooling lubricant, rust and oil--the smell of death. Bodies were as numerous as the pieces of rubble and he couldn't look anywhere without seeing a familiar face gaping lifelessly in the dust. All of his men, his friends, gone...no survivors anywhere. Seeing each pale visage thrust knives deeper into his Spark.

*How could this have happened? Why? Who? What?*

Towards the edge of the city, he started seeing dead Decepticons littering the landscape. The way the bodies were lying suggested the deflagration caught them completely off guard. Every corpse was in two or more pieces, as if they'd been torn apart by a horrible, unseen force.

Optimus pushed onward with the hope of hearing another voice. Autobot or Decepticon, it no longer mattered just so long as he knew he wasn't alone. He trudged forward, jerking his head hopefully towards every crackle, rustle or creak, but each time he was met with more loneliness. The destruction wore on him the further he walked. He felt it chipping at his stoic resolve, digging in like sand under his armor plating until rubbed his wiring raw. Emptiness lurked in every shadow and terror peeked around each ash cloud.

*It's like the entire planet is dead!*

He chewed his lips behind his battle mask. His functional optic glowed eerily in the hazy air. Numbness crept into the raw pain coursing through his circuitry. He changed tactics from search to survival. There was no knowing how long he'd have to travel before he ran across another living being. Wandering wouldn't do any good if he starved. So, though it sickened him, he frisked the bodies for rations. Most had solid bite-sized energon cubes and travel bars somewhere on their person. He collected what he found in a spent missile shell. The chains used to transport it became straps that made it easy to carry like a backpack.

*Nothing left to do but try the next city,* Optimus told himself ruefully. He transformed into vehicle mode and drove quickly towards the smoky horizon. The air was getting hotter. If it kept up at this rate, it wouldn't be long before Cybertron's surface became uninhabitable.

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Forty eight hours later, after miles upon miles of nothingness, Optimus' sensors detected debris again. Another leveled city with no detectable life signs. The scenery reminded him of historical footage he saw on Earth, a place humans called Hiroshima. Intimidating red haze hung over the horizon--by then the air was so hot he saw heat waves radiating off the ground. Nothing organic could survive these temperatures.

A sound made him jolt. His com, it clicked!

Optimus transformed to get his head higher. Sparks flew off his damaged leg, though it didn't hurt too much. He swung his head left and right. The clicks continued at regular intervals. Someone, somewhere, had a functional radio.

"Hello? Can you hear me? Whoever this is, please respond!"

Crackling offered new hope.

"Hello?"

No answer.

Optimus turned south, where the static seemed strongest, and slowly picked his way into the ruins. Finding the source of the signal didn't take long. Everything had been destroyed so completely that anything higher than his knees stuck out like a sore thumb. Thus, he had no trouble spotting the sole survivor.

Megatron sat quietly on a low, crumbled wall with his back to Optimus. His right antler-like antennae looked like it'd been snapped off, leaving only a jagged stub. He turned his head and met Optimus' gaze--and the Autobot noticed his rival's baleful stare lacked its usual venom. A large crack ran diagonally from the inner corner of his left optic to the top edge of his right cheek. He'd soldered it himself, judging by the rough job. Scratches marred his armor and sparks zapped inside an open, energon-stained wound on his right shoulder. Despite appearing injured and dirty, he still looked strangely regal amidst the ruin.

"M-Megatron..."

Megatron's optics narrowed.

Optimus raced towards the Decepticon leader. Friend or foe, it was a relief to see another living being again. "Megatron! Do you know what happened?"

Megatron scowled savagely and turned his back again without a word.

Optimus moved closer and realized Megatron was holding Starscream's wing blade in his lap. No sign of the Seeker anywhere. Maybe nothing remained but his blade. The thought made Optimus shudder.

"Megatron," he tried again, "Please, talk to me! Did you see what happened?"

Again, Megatron looked over his shoulder. He narrowed his eyes and Optimus noticed wires dangling like tentacles from a jagged hole in the side of his throat, but the horror didn't end there. The abundant smoke parted long enough that Optimus witnessed the extent of Megatron's mutilation. His legs ended just below the knee. It didn't look like a blast...they'd been *ripped* off. Wires hung limp, bright sparks dripping onto the ashy ground.

"Okay..." Optimus frowned, trying to keep his mind focused, "yes or no, then. Did you see what happened?"

Megatron nodded, deadpan. His fist relaxed and Starscream's wing blade clanged into the dust.

"Right." Optimus said. He put repairing Megatron's vocal processors at the top of his list, right along with taking cover. "I think I can repair you, but it's getting too hot to stay alive out here. We need to move. I'm hoping the underground tunnels will offer us refuge. I can carry you there."

At that, Megatron looked utterly appalled. He grabbed the wing blade he dropped and swung it at Optimus' head. Optimus dodged, falling backwards over somebody's bodiless arm.

"Megatron!" Optimus was aghast. "Look around you, Megatron! What good will fighting do now? Our planet might be dying around us!"

Megatron's bared fangs, when combined with his glowing eyes and facial wound, made him look primitive and savage in the smoke rising off the burning hot ground. He took another swing. Optimus rolled sideways and the sword scarred the ground inches from his head. The pack of energon rations slipped off his back, spilling some of its glowing contents in the dust.

Megatron dropped off the wall, dragging himself forward with his hands until he'd reached Optimus' side. He grabbed a handful of the spilled energon rations and tore viciously into them. There was nothing noble or dignified about his behavior. Optimus had to look away because he couldn't bear the sight of his greatest rival acting like a starving beast. It made sense, though, considering Megatron's injuries left him too immobile to find adequate nutrition. Going too long without refueling would make even the most unflappable mechs behave like famished animals at the sight of food.

Optimus offered him another handful of bite-sized cubes. Megatron sat up properly and ate them with a lot more dignity. He avoided Optimus' gaze, embarrassed by his earlier behavior. At least he seemed rational again with fuel in his tanks.

"Megatron, please, come with me." All of Optimus' hopes rested on Megatron's return to rationality. "There has to be a reason we're still alive. The only way to stay that way and find out is if we help each other. It's getting too hot to function out here, so come with me. I can carry you to the tunnels."

Optimus could see the angry flames in Megatron's red eyes as he considered his options. Finally, Megatron slung the makeshift energon pack over his cannon barrel and nodded his head. Optimus turned his back, letting Megatron climb on so he could carry him piggyback style. The added weight strained his sore leg, but he didn't let himself wince. It didn't seem fair to complain about an injured leg when Megatron no longer had any.

Optimus made sure his reluctant companion was secure before he started walking. "Get comfortable, this is going to be a long trip on foot. Let's hope the heat doesn't accelerate."

Megatron sighed heavily in reply, which made Optimus bite back his urge to chatter ceaselessly.

And so, for the next four hours, Optimus walked inexorably through chaos and ruin. The air itself was so hot it almost became tangible, and pressed down like an unforgiving weight intent upon crushing anything still living. Megatron hardly moved beyond adjusting his grip on Optimus' sensitive chest grill. Each movement tingled, making the trip all the more uncomfortable.

Partway to the tunnels, Optimus spotted Megatron's severed legs lying next to...it looked like Demolishor's torso. He tied them together with one of the chains from the makeshift backpack.

"I'll try to reattach these when we're out of this heat."

No response, though he swore he felt Megatron sneer at him. He sobered, handed Megatron the chain binding his disembodied legs and resumed walking. For the rest of the journey he wondered what Megatron thought of holding his own detached limbs.

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The tunnels were mercifully cooler, but forebodingly dark. Right then it was so hot on the surface that it made the Pit seem like an arctic refuge.

Optimus sank to his knees and eased Megatron onto the ground. Flickering waves wafted off their armor plating as their bodies dispelled the excess warmth.

"Okay, now we're out of that heat. Now let's see about your le--" He turned and found Megatron already pushing his knee joints into the sockets of his lower legs. The Decepticon leader held a soldering iron with his left hand and solder wires were clutched in his teeth while he furiously mended his own cables. Where he kept these supplies was a mystery, as Optimus hadn't seen him take them out.

"Would you like some help with that?"

Megatron shot him an 'are you stupid?' look and went back to work. Sparks crackled as he reconnected shredded wiring. It wasn't until he started soldering that his face showed pain. He didn't scream because he couldn't. But, somehow, he bore the pain with amazing dignity. Optimus doubted he could've handled that without passing out.

He realized he was staring when Megatron's feral eyes fixed once again upon him. They were crimson embers in the dimness surrounding them. He had such typical Decepticon features--high cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes and a long, straight nose. So *different* from the softer, gentler faces of the Autobots.

Megatron stored his tools in a panel hidden behind the treads on his left shoulder. Then he struggled onto his feet, his gaze still locked on Optimus'. His repair work was spot-on--when he walked, his movements were just as smooth as before he lost his legs. Treads, bare circuitry and wires showed through the fragmented metal. He stopped once he and Optimus were nose to nose, his eyes swirling between haunted shadows and burning anguish.

Their close proximity made Optimus uncomfortable. He never liked people invading his personal space without permission. Especially when that someone happened to be his biggest rival!

It was the penetrating gaze Optimus found the most disconcerting...Megatron's smoldering optics peered straight through him as if they knew all his secrets. Looking into them too long meant facing a dangerous path of emotions. But averting his eyes would mean he'd let Megatron intimidate him, and his pride just wouldn't allow it.

"You know..." Optimus tried not to let his discomfort show, "I could probably fix your vocal processor. You're only missing two wires." And when Megatron's optics flashed, he pointed out, "It's delicate work. I doubt you want to fry your ability to swallow. You have copper wiring, don't you?"

Megatron smirked, his lips pulling slowly off one dangerous fang. He seemed to enjoy the discomfort he caused.

"Look, let me repair you. It's minor rewiring."

Finally, after an eternity, the Decepticon Leader nodded his head.

Optimus grasped the frayed cables dangling from his broken ear finial and tore them free. "I'll need to borrow your soldering iron."

The proper tool was promptly shoved into his hand along with the coiled solder. It would be one of the most uncomfortable moments of Optimus' life. There he was, poking around inside his arch enemy's *throat*. He was surprised Megatron even trusted him enough to let him do this. Then again, the wrist blade suddenly pressed against his side was a reminder to not try anything funny. Beyond that, he remained cooperatively still.

"Almost got it..." Optimus connected the last pieces of copper and sparks flew.

"Ow!" Megatron roared.

Well, at least he wasn't mute anymore.

Optimus handed Megatron's tools over and stepped back a few paces. "Better?"

Megatron rubbed his throat, grimacing. His voice was strangely comforting to hear. "It will have to do." He smirked, "Well, it looks like it's just you and me, Prime."

Then, suddenly, he shoved Optimus against the wall. Optimus saw nothing but sharp, purple fingers headed for his face and shooting pains tore through his forehead. He felt pressure in his left optic socket.

"Hey, what are you--"

"Shut up and stay still."

Optimus obeyed only because squirming hurt less. He braced himself when he saw the soldering iron headed towards his face. Oh, *that* set off alarms all across his damage detection system. Burning solder melted against his plating. Searing, aching, Optimus clenched his teeth so he wouldn't scream. The pain went on forever. Megatron wasn't gentle and did not apologize.

"Don't touch your face for thirty minutes." Megatron stepped back. "It will hurt until then."

His statement came just in time to stop Optimus from clutching his face. The agony faded a little and suddenly he had binocular vision again. His first stereo view was of Megatron's back shrinking into the darkened corridor.

"You could have numbed--"

"My, my, aren't we grateful?" Megatron laughed coldly, "Get used to the pain, Optimus. Decepticons don't use pathetic things like numbing agents--not even for major surgery. Such things were never provided to us back in the day, so we learned to live without."

*That's...that's barbaric!*

Optimus took a few skipping steps to catch up, but froze at his reflection in the metallic wall at his left. Two optics stared back at him--one gold, the other crimson surrounded by silver to make it fit in the socket.

"Consider it a trade," Megatron said flatly, without turning around. "Your wires for one of my spare optics."

"Fine. We're even." Optimus caught up with the Decepticon leader. Megatron didn't look too keen on continuing their conversation, so Optimus gazed ahead into the darkness of their future and asked, "What now?"

How odd that Megatron seemed to know exactly where he was going. Especially when he stopped next to a wall someone welded shut long ago. "We have to go deeper than this level. The heat is radiating downwards." He pointed his cannon at the welding, fired a single shot and the metal plate crumbled like tissue paper. Smirking, he turned around. "After you."

"Why should I go first?"

Megatron's smirk melted. He narrowed his eyes, "You might shoot me in the back."

"You should know me better than that by now." The constant distrust got on Optimus' nerves. He hated himself for wishing someone other than Megatron had survived the mysterious destruction.

The other mech wouldn't budge. Optimus sighed and slipped into the hole...

"AAAH!!!"

...only to find himself falling!

The impact came faster than expected, jolting his voice to silence. It was cold and pitch black...not even light from the hole above offered anything. He heard pings and clanks as Megatron lowered himself on a large ladder somewhere near his head.

"You're an idiot, Optimus *Prime*," Megatron rumbled. Bright lights stabbed the inky blackness. It came from the panels in Megatron's shoulders, eerily illuminating his face from where his Decepticon insignia used to be. Optimus had no idea those even came off! "Do you blindly leap into every hole on command?"

"You could have warned me."

"Tch. Get up!"

Again, Optimus saw no point in arguing, though Megatron's mocking began to wear on his exhausted servos. He helped himself up and turned to look around.

This tunnel appeared rocky, though touching the wall told him it was at least semi-metallic. Long defunct lights were wired along the walls and ceiling.

"We're in a mine..."

Megatron shouldered by. "Yes...your intelligence is amazing."

"I've...I've never seen one in person before."

"Ugh, what in the world did you *do* with your life before you became a leader? Paperwork?"

The derision was thick enough to taste. Optimus sneered behind his mask and felt suddenly ashamed of his previous job.

"Yes, I did." He said. "Most of what I knew about the miners, I learned by reading the records passed across my desk."

All that reading...it made him thirst for battle. He always loved a good brawl--especially with miners who hung out in taverns, but not as a leader--not as someone so visible his triumphs and failures were known by all.

"That explains a lot. Well, Optimus, while you were up there in your little air-conditioned office, hoping you wouldn't strain a finger filing something in a drawer, I was down here working my servos off, digging out the materials used to build *your* cities and processing the energon you sipped on break...and the only personal possession I had to call my own was my *name*. I have worked for every moment of my leadership." Megatron narrowed his eyes, and Optimus wasn't sure if it was jealousy or anguish that sprinkled ice in his voice, "You've had everything handed to you, Optimus *Prime*. It's a wonder you survived this long! Now your grand cities are gone. Your men are gone. You are utterly alone. You have no electronics and no one to hand you what you want. You've lost everything you sought to protect from me. All you have left is your name. What does that make you feel?"

No wonder the haunted look hung around Megatron's features. Most of the buildings were made of the metals he mined from these tunnels. The men who worked for him were chosen by him alone, not presented as worthy soldiers. He saw all his hard work, all the glory he scraped from the dust in the ground, demolished in the flicker of an optic.

"I don't think this is a time to argue about our origins," Optimus sought to diffuse this fight before it began. He swallowed the anger and pain Megatron chipped free. Paperwork wasn't his *only* job...but



said nothing because it'd just give Megatron more verbal ammunition. He felt lower than the ground and didn't want to face it in Megatron's presence. "We should get moving. I doubt this level will stay cool for very long."

"Yes, yes, ignore everything I just said. Ignore that which you don't want to hear. Autobots are incredibly skilled at that." Megatron stepped in Optimus' path and the lights on his shoulders became blindingly bright. "Cybertron is virtually decimated. We are the only ones left. Nothing to come between us. We should finish this war once and for all."

"I see no need to resume our battle!" Now Optimus began to lose his temper. It boiled in flaming waves somewhere behind his Spark. "Fighting won't accomplish anything, Megatron! Even if you won, you have nothing to conquer!"

"Oh, yes I do." Megatron grinned, baring his fangs. "I'll conquer you."

"Right. You beat me. Then what? You lord over a dead planet. What's the *point*?"

"Tch, you never change, do you?" Megatron clicked his tongue, "Knowing I ground you into dust, and knowing I'm strong enough to survive longer than you...*that* is the point."

Optimus threw his hands in the air. "Fine! Shoot me! Spend the rest of your life alone in this hole and die right where you started!"

Laughter greeted him. Megatron waved his hand and doubled over, slapping his knee. "I--had no idea--you had a temper..." He continued to guffaw. "You should see yourself!"

"I also have the fuel." Optimus countered, but his statement had no effect on the situation. He realized Megatron *wanted* him to turn around and hit him. His self control was being tested. He refused to give in and punch his rival. It didn't seem right anymore--him, one of society's jewels grinding a dirt smear under his heel. Miners were always seen as disgusting, uneducated and uncouth. They were the trash of society, the dirty specks marring an otherwise perfect picture.

Maybe the Autobots were to blame for the war, for neglecting those who worked the hardest. Those who lived on the surface weren't too happy about Mini-Cons taking over the work of the miners...because it meant those filthy workers emerged into the daylight. The unseen, unheard people of Cybertron were suddenly in front of everyone. They were met with contempt and walled off, probably forced to live in the same filth they sought to escape.

And what did the Decepticons do about that? They rioted. They started fighting for what they believed they had a right to have. A leader was needed and Optimus found himself chosen. The Autobots wanted someone to stop the violence with force. The fighting escalated into a war.

Optimus felt smaller than dust under Megatron's heated glare. Decepticons weren't evil for evil's sake. They were *made*. Combined with the massive, immeasurable loss he witnessed above ground, he was amazed he didn't crumble into subatomic pieces inside.

"Yes," Megatron whispered, answering his silent question. "I always knew I'd die in filth. What makes me laugh is knowing you will as well. So, let's have a little fun and see who lives the longest down here, shall we?"

"Fine."

With that slag-eating grin still on his face, Megatron faced the darkest tunnel and started walking.

The hours passed in silence while Optimus' emotions continued their bitter swirl. Seeing nothing but what Megatron's lights revealed did little to lift his sullen mood. All he could think about was his dead world and the foe his own people helped create.

Megatron's lights swept to the left, briefly illuminating several lines of recharge berths stacked like shelves in the walls.

"We're stopping here tonight. Hang the fuel supplies on the hook behind you."

Did day and night even matter anymore?

Optimus found it almost funny how Megatron did most of the talking since his voice was restored. His comments were often quips and chide remarks, but each one dug deeper into Optimus' failing mental resolves. He wondered if this was Megatron's means of dealing with the horror above. That had to be it--he belittled so he wouldn't feel small.

Optimus hung the makeshift backpack on the hook behind him. Then he decided to climb into the bunk under Megatron's. At least, that way, he'd hear it if Megatron tried anything funny.

"I hope you aren't afraid of the dark, Optimus," Megatron said, shutting down his shoulder lights. The darkness became absolute--not even the light from Optimus' mismatched optics touched the bunk barely six feet above his nose.

"No," Optimus whispered, "I'm not."

And the silence stretched on. Optimus was almost in recharge when Megatron started to speak again, his tone softer than before.

"I saw it on the horizon. Chaos...it was chaos. This...wave...so purple and beautiful. I had Starscream right in front of me, discussing battle plans. He exploded. Just...exploded, his shrapnel ripping out my throat. Cyclonus was yanked in two directions at once--I've never seen so much energon shed at one time. Demolishor collapsed last and I lost sight of him in the dust." There was a long pause before he continued. His voice actually sounded pained. "I saw people flung into the air, shredded and slammed back down. Buildings suffered the same. It killed everyone...and left me sitting there exactly as you found me. I could hear it continuing behind me. I don't even know what happened or why I survived. What did you see, Optimus? What did you see?"

"Nothing." Optimus answered honestly. "I heard rumbling and someone yelling 'it's all exploding!' But the moment I stepped outside, something hit me in the head. I was off-lined. I woke up to a scene similar to yours...decimation...my men in pieces."

"Isn't it strange that out of all the Cybertronians on the planet, only the leaders are left standing?"

Optimus wanted to curl up in the tiniest ball possible, but the bunk didn't have enough room. He could only lay on his back.

"What are you saying?"

Megatron yawned audibly, his voice far too casual for the weight of their conversation. "Perhaps this isn't as random as we think."

"Hm."

Optimus did not sleep well that night. First off, Megatron had a loose intake valve that made him snore once he fell into recharge. Secondly, every time he turned his optics off, Optimus saw the

horrible landscapes as clearly as he would if they were actually in front of him.

Of the two of them, Megatron seemed to have the stronger mental resolves. Either the chaos didn't bother him, or he proved himself a stupendous actor.

Optimus felt as if he'd just entered deep recharge when a rough hand shook his shoulder. Dazed, his sensors not all online, he stumbled gracelessly off the bunk berth and let his forehead rest on the opposite wall. Darkness upon darkness topped in more darkness. He missed the sun and stars.

"Report," he mumbled.

Megatron's voice brought him to full alert. "It is dark and the temperature on the surface is about the same as a forge. We'd melt in an hour." Then he turned his lights on, blasting Optimus' unprepared optics.

"Ow!"

"Pft. You're pathetic."

"Just...unaccustomed..." Optimus gathered his wits, deciding not to respond to any of Megatron's insults. "How in the world did you exist in the dark like this? It's...depressing."

Half of Megatron's full lips curled upwards, straining the solder on his cheek. "I did not see the sky or breathe surface air for the first million years of my existence. To me, this is *home*. So get used to it, we're probably going to be here for a long time."

"Where are we going?"

"Deeper, obviously."

Optimus grabbed the backpack off the wall and strapped it to his shoulders. He saw Megatron pulling items from a compartment under the bunk he slept on--a pick axe, two transparent safety visors and a small silver cylinder. He set them all in a pouch secured to his hip by magnets.

"Let's be off."

And so they walked into a tunnel that narrowed the further they went. Megatron took many twists and turns, a path he obviously knew like the back of his hand. They didn't speak, but Megatron occasionally glanced over his shoulders as if making sure Optimus stayed right behind him.

"Here we are." Megatron gestured to a dead end. He took the pick from the pouch on his hip and tossed it at Optimus, followed by one of the safety visors.

"What the..."

"*You* are going to dig. I'm taking a nap."

"Hey!"

"Welcome to my life." Megatron snarled, flopping down against the wall behind them so his headlights remained pointed at Optimus. "Get to work...or do you consider yourself above such mundane labor?"

That annoying feeling of smallness crept back into Optimus' psyche. The red eyes boring into the side of his head didn't help. He slid the visor onto his face and stared down at the dirty, blackened pick resting in his clean, white hand. Some of the dirt had already rubbed off into the scratches on his

fingertips and palm. Deciding it wasn't worth arguing about, he faced the wall and took a swing. He was surprised when the pick bounced off and nearly flew out of his hands.

"Ugh, you idiot! You can't do anything!" Megatron grabbed the handle. "Swing from below or to the side, not over your own head. That's how you lose optics down here!"

"I'm not the one who spent years doing this!" Optimus grouched.

"You're pathetic, Optimus! Watch me."

The way Megatron swung that pick was...almost beautiful. He moved a lot like human baseball players striking a baseball, each swing and recoil occurring in the same fluid motion. It only took him about ten swipes to clear out a hole the size of his head. Dust and soot coated his body.

Optimus startled when Megatron stopped and thrust the pick at his chest. "I hope you paid attention. Now, you take over."

No choice...Optimus accepted the dirty tool and copied Megatron's movements. Digging wasn't nearly as easy as it looked. It taxed his hydraulics systems and strained the joints in his shoulders, elbows and wrists. Flying particles sandblasted his paint job and rolled off his chest.

And Megatron just sat on the ground behind him, munching on their rations with a cloying smile smeared across his face.

"Hey! Those are--"

"Shut up and dig."

"Stop eating our rations."

"Dig and you won't have to worry."

So, Optimus dug.

It did not take long for the dirt, dust and grime to collect on his armor. His bold coloring dulled like walking death. The air smelled stale and dusty, and it made Optimus cough to clear his intake system.

Truth be told--he really didn't realize the effort required just to build his city. He never gave a thought to where his energon came from or what kept the buildings standing. His life was the paperwork passing his desk all the way up until the war. And all that time, Megatron was down in this Primus-forsaken place, chopping away.

Optimus swung the pick axe until his arms ached and joint lubricant leaked through the seams in his armor. Soot blackened his white hands, rendering them unrecognizable. His audios soon grew numb to the painful shriek of pick and solid wall meeting.

Hours later, with the wall cleared and his arms ready to fall off, Optimus found himself appreciating the people who broke their backs under these deplorable conditions. He gazed tiredly at his handiwork to find himself staring at something crystalline. It felt like glass when he touched it and had the faintest purple glow. In this dank place, any light shone like hope.

"Oh..." Optimus licked his lips behind the mask.

Megatron grabbed his wrist, wrenching him back. "No. I get to reap the rewards of *your* hard work."

Megatron proceeded to dig the ore from the wall and eat it raw, leaving Optimus to stand there in desperate need of energon. He walked off with the pack of rations hanging on his arm, laughing.

"Keep digging and you *might* find a few morsels for yourself. Meanwhile, I'll go find more suitable materials to process for transport in this pathetic excuse of a carrying case."

"Can't we just carry the crystals?"

Megatron's reply, for once, wasn't derisive. "No...raw energon is too unstable. Its molecular structure isn't stable until it's processed. Jarring it around in a metal container just asks for an explosion. I will locate us enough rations to last several months. You? Dig. Or would you rather go hungry?"

Optimus was happy to resume picking at the rocks until he freed two large crystals. He could hear Megatron's footsteps somewhere in the distance. Assured he was alone, Optimus retracted his mask just long enough to hastily consume the meager nutrition. It tasted bitter, or was the unpleasant flavor his own realization at how badly society treated its own kind that tainted his meal? Here he was, always proclaiming the Autobots to be the kindest people on Cybertron when, without his knowledge, those same people were ordering slaves around underground. To make matter worse, he wasn't exactly poor--he'd lived in a lavish home atop one of Cyber City's finest spires and far away from this disgusting reality. Yet while he reclined up there on a wide, comfortable berth with nothing to worry about, people were cramming into the bunks down here, hoping just to wake up again. They had almost no rest because the city above always demanded more.

Had his entire leadership been a giant, hypocritical lie?

"Megatron!" Optimus closed his facemask and trudged towards the lights moving at the far end of the corridor.

Megatron knelt, pouring pulverized energon crystals into a sulfuric-smelling acid compound. He didn't seem to notice the scent, or had grown desensitized to it. Optimus, on the other hand, nearly retched each time he cycled air.

"Megatron," he choked out.

"What?" The Decepticon leader looked up. Dirt and soot were smudged all over his face and arms like war paint.

"If I'd known..." Optimus bit his lip. He'd always been a leader of integrity and he had to say this before everything ate him alive inside, "If I'd known what was going on, I would've put a stop to it. I speak the truth when I say I had no idea my people were treating yours like slaves."

Megatron's optics narrowed into glowing red slits. They shimmered in mixes of acid hate and boiling rage that slowly cooled to neutrality. "Words can't change the past, Optimus. It doesn't matter...everything we've done is burning."

"Then why continue the fighting? We've both *lost*."

"No. *You* have lost." Megatron growled through his bared fangs, "You mourn your men, but you also mourn the magnificent cities you never raised a finger to build. You can't even stand to be dirty! Every time I glance up, you're trying to wipe it off. Well, don't bother. It won't come off without a heavy scrub, and you won't find any brushes down here. You have to deal with the filth. You have to deal with *me*. Now, shut up and move the container by your leg to the spout on the wall behind you."

Yet again Optimus felt smaller than a subatomic particle. His apology had all the effect of putty gum

plugging a waterfall. He grudgingly slid the rectangular pan to the spout Megatron indicated. Seconds later, Megatron turned a handle and pure, glowing liquid energon poured from the spigot. There was enough to feed a hundred mechs!

Megatron lowered what looked like a giant cookie cutter with several squares into the pan and pressed a button that made it snap shut. The device hissed, clicked and sputtered for five minutes.

Then, with a strangely dazzling smile, Megatron lifted the whole thing and tipped it. Brilliant energon cubes poured out all over the ground between them.

"Payday," he said.

Optimus could only look on in awe. All that work just to create the main fuel source people consumed above?

"Scoop this into the carrying container and put what's left in the cylinder by the wall. That will be our emergency store. To make things fair, we'll trade off with it. One carries the pack, the other carries the extra. How does that sound?"

Again, with that almost gentle tone. Was it a hint of pain peeking through stone?

"All right, fine." Optimus hardened himself

"Good. Now, let's get some rest. I don't know if you realized this, but we've been working for twenty four hours. Recharge is important in places like this. Tomorrow, we dig to the next level down."

No complaints from Optimus. He was actually happy to crawl into the berth. At least until Megatron dangled his head down and peered at him in the darkness.

"By the way, Optimus, I'm curious..."

"About what?" Optimus just wanted to sleep.

"That mask of yours...do you ever take it off?"

The Autobot scoffed. "I have to if I want to eat. Why?"

"Oh, no real reason. I suppose after staring at it for millions of years, I suppose I'm curious as to what you look like."

"Oh." Optimus turned his head away, trying through body language to tell Megatron he needed his rest. "Can I please rest in peace?"

Megatron's expression hardened. "One more question."

"What?" Optimus sighed.

"Was your name always Optimus?"

"...no."

"Heh, heh..." Megatron scratched at the solder on his face. "I figured as much. You Autobots throw names away as easily as everything else. Well, then, Optimus, what is your real name?"

And Optimus met his eyes. There was always something dangerous in Megatron's optics--something

powerful, ruthless and intense that made Optimus feel fidgety and strange inside. In battle he could bury the buffeting sensation behind orders and defense strategies. But here, with nothing else to think about, he found himself facing a harsher reality than the one above ground.

In Megatron's eyes, Optimus saw *himself*.

"My name used to be Orion Pax," he finally said, facing the full power of those eyes, "and it wasn't my choice to change it. It wasn't even my choice to fight this war. It was just something I had to do. I never wanted or asked for it. I gave everything I called mine up when the council handed me the Matrix of Leadership. Everything I owned after that day belonged to Optimus Prime, not Orion Pax."

"Interesting." Megatron returned to his own bunk. "Good night, Orion."

Optimus said nothing. He shut off his optics despite the haunting images threatening his processors. So many faces, so many lives lost...it opened a gaping hole somewhere near his Spark...and with Megatron so close he didn't have the courage to let his grief out as tears.

During the next three days, Optimus and Megatron drilled several hundred feet into the unforgiving wall. The metallic rocks became so hard the two mining mechs started blasting just to make progress. Utterly *exhausting* work, and all the laser energy being expelled quickly heated the surrounding area. Hot panels against exposed wiring was not a very pleasant sensation, but nowhere near as annoying as dust clogging intake valves. Optimus coughed more than he worked. He *hated* this place!

"Just like the good old days!" Megatron shouted over another explosion. He aimed low and fired his cannon once more, tearing another crater into cave wall.

Optimus squinted through the clearing smoke. More rock. Did it ever end?

"Are we making progress?" he asked.

"I'd say a good ten feet."

"Only ten?" Optimus walked over and stood right next to Megatron in disbelief. All that work for ten feet?

"I've run into slabs that required ten days just to clear a passage the length of my arm. Stop complaining!"

"I just--" Optimus froze, he swore he just felt the ground shake under his feet. "Wait...did you feel that?"

Another tremor. Dust and rocks pattered across their armor.

"The ground unstable. We have to--"

But there no longer *was* a ground to stand on. Optimus' fall jolted to a halt and he realized Megatron had him by the hand. Rocks pelted his face when he looked up--he didn't dare glance down.

"Swing up!" Megatron snarled. "Hurry!"

Optimus kicked his legs forward for momentum. He swung himself high enough to grab Megatron's other hand. Just as Megatron started pulling him up, he heard a loud CRACK--and reality became a dizzying spin between screaming, darkness and cold wind ending in a clang that sent dull pain though his back. Megatron's full weight pressed down upon his chest, adding to his discomfort.

"Ugh," Optimus groaned. "Are you all right?"

"I'm...functional," Megatron's deep, growling voice was right in his audio, and Optimus became uncomfortably conscious of the other's cycled air puffing hotly against his intact ear finial. He tried to shut it out. His rival wasn't supposed to make him feel this way!

"So, what now? Is there any way back up?"

Megatron sighed and Optimus wished he would move, or at least stop breathing on his audio, but he didn't. "The grappling hooks are still up there." Finally, he sat up and aimed his lights at the silver walls. There were no handholds.

Optimus grew slowly aware that the floor underneath and the surrounding walls were smooth paneling rather than rock. Most were rusty, but a few places still glistened eerily in the harsh



lightning. The air around them hung in a stillness so absolute it was as if time forgot to exist.

"Megatron, wait! Go back to the left!"

"What?"

"Just do it!"

The light beams jogged left and glistened across images engraved upon the metallic wall. *Huge* images twice Megatron's height. One was planet Cybertron surrounded by purple fog and flanked by Autobot and Decepticon sigils. The symbols didn't surprise Optimus...the figures on whose chests they were placed nearly stopped his fuel pump.

"That's...us!" Megatron squinted. "But how?"

"I don't know." Optimus stared, confused and even afraid. Who carved this? Why? When? He looked closer and spotted a seam running down the center of Cybertron's image.

"This doesn't make sense!" Megatron said, joining Optimus by the wall.

The second he was beside Optimus, the ground shook so hard they stumbled to stay standing. Grinding sounds punctuated the wall before them sliding apart. It left a space just large enough to slip through.

Megatron walked right on inside.

"Megatron!"

"Oh, come on! Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Grrr..." Optimus pushed between the doors, startling when they slammed together behind him. He was glad Megatron had the rations lashed to his cannon...the doors would've crushed them had Optimus been wearing the pack.

The first thing he noticed was the glowing white coolant river running from a waterfall spanning the entire wall on their left. This tunnel looked relatively tall and narrow, offering enough room to walk side by side. The walls here were clean and shiny, making Optimus and Megatron's dirty forms appear drab by comparison, and the coolant river provided enough light that Megatron shut off his shoulder lamps.

Optimus knelt to dip his hands in the coolant. This was it--he had to remove his mask or he couldn't drink. How strange...this moment didn't make him nervous at all. There were no disfiguring scars or blemishes to hide. In fact, people said he had a very *beautiful* face with delicate cheeks and a small, heart shaped mouth.

He retracted his mask and drank his fill. Exposing his visage offered a strange relief, as if his armor no longer felt too tight for his framework. He could feel Megatron's gaze roaming over his naked features.

"So..." Megatron drank as well, though not as much. He was too busy staring at Optimus and, oddly, smiling. "...this is the face of Orion Pax."

"Your point?" Optimus sneered, closing the mask again.

"You look so young." Megatron shook his head in obvious disbelief. "And here, I thought you were

covering an unsightly scar like *this*," he pointed to his own face.

"Oh? Sorry to disappoint you."

"I never said I was *disappointed*." Megatron grinned once more and started blithely down the narrow corridor, leaving Optimus more confused than ever. When did that fanged smile stop intimidating him? When did he start anticipating its appearance?

"Though..." Megatron went on once Optimus caught up, "I wonder why you still bother wearing it now that I've seen your f--"

"It's part of who I am now," Optimus cut him off.

"Reeeeeeally?" Megatron drew the word out as if Optimus lacked the intelligence to understand standard speech. "I wonder, what are you hiding from?"

Again, Optimus' temper turned over like a tempestuous ocean. "You say that when your mouth has been running ever since I reconnected your vocal processor. Is it to annoy me...or does being quiet mean you have to think?"

"Don't change the subject."

"I didn't change the subject."

"This isn't about me!" Megatron snapped.

"No, this is about *us*."

"And you're still hiding behind that battle mask."

The swirls inside Optimus boiled over in flaming tsunamis. Before he knew it he'd slammed Megatron against the wall and thrust his face inches from the Decepticon leader's.

"I'll take my mask off if you take *your* mask off, you son of a glitch!" he growled, pulling Megatron forward and smacking him into the wall again for good measure. To make his point, he retracted the plates covering his nose and mouth. "I can tell you're in pain from this. We both are. You parade around, claiming you haven't lost a thing, but we both know you lost just as much as I did!"

"What use is there in crying over a situation I can't change?" Megatron replied with equal venom. He didn't want to face the subject, but Optimus wouldn't let him dodge it this time.

"Last time I checked," Optimus spoke through clenched teeth, "pain is the same whether you're an Autobot or a Decepticon."

Their eyes remained locked, a battle of wills in which Optimus saw himself and everything he said reflected in Megatron's tight-lipped stare.

Reality spun a circle and Optimus was suddenly pinned against the wall with Megatron's voice snarling in his audio, "*Pain* consumes you alive if you let it. It opens an abyss in your Spark and swallows you like a black hole. The strong are the ones who can fight the abyss."

The hole inside Optimus, a collection of faces long gone, dragged the churning ocean of self control towards his eyes where it erupted in a single, golden mech fluid tear.

"The strong may fight their inner black hole, but the brave aren't afraid to show they *have* one."

Megatron's jaw clenched. His lips pulled back until the entire length of his fangs gleamed in the eerie lighting. Whatever self control he had wavered like a scale thrown off-balance. He narrowed his eyes, reached up and wiped at his cheek. Mech fluid clung onto the dirt coating his purple fingers. He brought his fingertips to his lips and tasted them.

"Hm."

Then he roughly passed his thumb across Optimus' cheek, smearing dirt on the flawless metal, before lifting it towards his mouth and ingesting the liquid residue.

"Isn't it ironic that our bitterest pain is made of the sweetest fluid produced by our bodies?" Megatron said in a tone so nonchalant it was as if the previous events never happened. He shoved Optimus carelessly aside and resumed walking down the narrow corridor. At the end, where the path curved sharply to the right, he paused and spoke softly, "I see the men I lost every time I offline my optics. I see the look on Starscream's face when his body started to explode. The difference between us is I don't dwell. I don't sit and wonder if I could've saved him because I already know the answer is no."

Megatron turned the corner, effectively cutting off their conversation. Optimus stood there without so much as a sharp retort to throw at Megatron's retreating back.

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The next meal Optimus and Megatron ate together would be more awkward than the time Optimus learned what the human saying "pop your cherry" *really* meant.

He spent the entire time avoiding Megatron's gaze, which remained fixed on his exposed face. It slid over and around his mouth each time he bit into an energon cube.

"Would you stop staring?" They were the first words Optimus said since their quarrel near the mysterious doors.

Megatron's smile flitted across his face. It made his eyes squint into crimson slivers.

"Uncomfortable?"

"Tch."

"I suppose it's curiosity. How many people have you kissed with that mouth?" His grin became mischievous. "I suspect you're a virgin."

"My sex life is none of your business," Optimus said curtly, turning away.

"You mean your lack of one," Megatron laughed.

"I'm sure you're just as deprived. Big war, annoying enemy, doesn't leave much time to share Sparks with anyone, does it?" Optimus palmed his last energon cube and smirked at how fast he cut Megatron's laughter off. His gaze went to Megatron's mouth, taking in the full, round lips that, even while relaxed, seemed to curve downwards in a natural frown. He wondered what it would feel like to have that dangerous thing glide over his throat and--

*Where in the world did THAT thought come from?* Optimus tore his gaze off his rival's face, ignoring the derisive laugh stirred by his uncomfortable shifting.

Sighing, Optimus pushed his tired, dirty body upright and glanced over at Megatron, who reclined while propped up on one elbow like a misplaced sculpture on the clean, silver ground. He'd gained a lot more respect for his greatest rival. There were some moments where he found himself enjoying his

company--even when they argued, because having someone to argue with was far better than wasting away alone--and he couldn't help but wonder if things between them would've been different had they gone through all this and met again with the knowledge they possessed now. Would they still go to war? Would they still be rivals on opposing sides?

"Would you have a bond right now if we hadn't gone to war?" Optimus asked, more to fill the silence than for the sake of actual conversation.

"I don't know." Megatron answered coolly. "I've felt attraction before. I know what lust feels like. But love..." Then he clicked his tongue and stood up, shaking his head as if his thoughts tasted sour. He met Optimus' gaze and a strange sadness glimmered in his eyes. "People like us don't have time for love. And even if I did have the time, I doubt the relationship would've worked."

"Who was--"

"Nevermind!" Megatron grouched. The word stretched the space between them into a canyon. Optimus sympathized all too well with Megatron's sentiment on love. Mechs like them were programmed to be fighters, not lovers.

They said nothing more. Megatron picked up the backpack and they resumed their course down the narrow corridor. The roar of the coolant waterfall was a constant companion on their left. Optimus noticed the coolant river beside them becoming more agitated and wild. Their path tilted into a shallow incline. Wherever it led, it carried them even deeper into the planet.

Megatron rounded another corner and thrust his arm out sideways, blocking the way. "Wait."

Optimus was jolted from his thoughts. "What?"

"The terrain is too steep to walk on. I think I can traverse it in tank mode, but I'm not so sure about your tires."

"I don't see anything I'd crash into."

"This is unknown territory--I don't recommend just rolling down."

"I think you're overly paranoid." Optimus smiled sadly. He found it strangely liberating to make choices without worrying about the well being of his army. The same thought carried guilt on its heels...how could he think such a selfish thought?

Megatron rolled his optics. "So says the same mech who didn't want me to walk through the first door."

Optimus shook himself back into the present.

"People change."

"What do--"

Optimus transformed and gunned it over the side.

"You *IDIOT!*" yelled Megatron.

Optimus ignored him and enjoyed the almost weightless feeling of acceleration. He saw the corridor floor flatten out again. His mind reeled as he imagined himself smashing flat against the wall like a human soda can. He pumped his brakes, expecting his momentum to slow, but the deafening shriek

of his tires brought a whole new reality into being. In a last, desperate attempt to stop before he contacted the large, glistening panels at the corridor's end, Optimus turned sideways. His vehicular form jack knifed and rolled violently for a nauseating eternity. He'd never remember the impact--one minute he was rolling and the next he heard Megatron shouting his name.

"Uhhhh..." Optimus forced himself upright and transformed, "stop yelling!"

"You moronic Autobot!"

The floor proved too smooth even for Megatron's treads. Optimus heard his surprised grunt as he came barreling down the metallic slope. Megatron's treads ran in reverse to no avail. He finally transformed, tumbling head over heels until he crashed into Optimus. The impact rang like an explosion that reverberated around the enclosed space as they toppled in an ungraceful heap of moving, tangled limbs.

"Oof!"

Optimus gazed up at his rival's sneering visage and tilted his head. Megatron stared back, his expression unreadable. Their faces were literally inches apart--so close Optimus felt Megatron's cycled breath waft against his lips.

"Well..." Optimus said. He found himself floundering in the red optics he didn't want to look into, but there was no other direction he could turn without making the situation even more awkward, "I guess treads aren't everything."

"I suppose not," Megatron replied curtly. He pushed off Optimus' chest and stood up, directing his gaze at the paneling before them.

Optimus regained a vertical base and followed his companion's steady gaze. The engraving he saw on the first door also existed on this panel, save for one small difference: their likenesses were looking at each other instead of facing forward.

"What do you suppose this means?" Megatron held his chin between thumb and forefinger.

"I'm not sure, though..." Optimus frowned, "The last door didn't open until we stood next to each other like the image."

"So?"

Optimus turned his head. There was no denying a connection between their actions and the doors opening.

"Megatron, look me in the eyes."

Snorting, obviously not believing, Megatron fixed his eyes on Optimus'. Nothing happened. He looked away, uncomfortably shifting his weight. "This is foolish!"

"Give it time. Come on, let's try it again."

Megatron's discomfort made itself obvious in the way he shuffled his feet. Optimus found himself once more in the line of those bottomless red eyes that made him feel emotions he wasn't supposed to think about right now. The danger in Megatron's gaze was almost tangible, and Optimus silently wondered what it tasted like.

He saw Megatron relax, a flicker of hardness leaving his optics just long enough to glimpse the

haunting images he saw above ground. A vulnerability so fleeting and dim it never quite reached the surface. Anger, fear, passion and grief surrounded Megatron like a scarlet fog so thick one had to wonder how he saw where he was going in life.

Everything around them shook as the panels split and slid apart. Whining noises indicated ancient joints that hadn't moved in eons were grinding to life.

Optimus didn't notice the passageway was open until Megatron cleared his vocal apparatus. It broke the spell cast over the moment, waking time from its sleep and returning his mind to the task at hand. They squeezed through the doors only to have them snap shut once they passed.

No going back. No direction to go but forward.

This corridor looked even weirder than the one before. For one, it smelled awful, like sulfur. Optimus' gaze traversed the vaulted, dome shape of the room. The walls were faceted mirrors glistening like polished gems. When Optimus peered over the side, he discovered the source of the smell was a lake of sulfuric acid.

"Whoever falls is dead," he said.

"Then I have a suggestion," Megatron made a face. "Don't fall."

The only way across was a menacingly narrow walkway. Optimus squinted at it...the block had a peak running down its center. Not even his Metallikato training, which included balance and agility, would get him to the other side safely.

"This is perfect! How in the Pit do we cross *that*?" Megatron growled.

Optimus measured the twin inclines with his gaze. He nodded to himself.

"We go at the same time."

"What?"

"If we hang onto each others' hand, we can balance each other."

"You're insane!"

Optimus' temper stirred again. "Look around you, Megatron! The only way across is over that pathway." He jabbed a finger at the block, "Something is guiding us. Maybe it's Primus himself. All I know is we'll never find out unless we work together. So come on, aren't you the least bit curious about where we're heading?"

Megatron twisted his mouth to the left and shifted around on his feet. He glanced from the block to Optimus and back. His face pulled. Finally, he tugged their ration pack off his cannon barrel and shoved it against Optimus' chest.

"Carry this, it'll even out our weight."

He was *shaking*.

"Megatron..." Optimus softened his tone. "What is it?"

"Noth--"

"Tell me."

The Decepticon leader stopped and licked his lips. His gaze flickered between the block, the acid and the ground at their feet. The usual, feral gleam in his eyes had been replaced with something cooler, lonelier.

"Millennia ago, shortly after my creation date, I saw someone fall into an acid lake much like that one. He slipped...he clung to the edge for ages before he fell. It's...probably the most painful way to die. He was right in front of me, begging, and I didn't help him. I could have stretched out my arm and saved him, but I did nothing. I watched him dangle and I did *nothing*."

"Are you serious? Why?"

Megatron's icy glare died before it could freeze the air around him. He turned to look out over the motionless, glistening lake far below and said, "I was afraid."

The revelation struck Optimus somewhere near his Spark. He never imagined Megatron afraid of anything. Hearing such an admission reminded him that his rival was, underneath it all, just another Cybertronian like himself. And while he sympathized, Optimus also knew he needed Megatron focused on getting across the narrow pathway.

He didn't realize he'd reached out until he felt his hand rest on Megatron's large, purple shoulder. "I won't let you fall. You'll be fine."

"You're so predictable." Megatron's eyes narrowed. He glowered at the offered hand. "Let's get this over with."

They joined hands and approached the block. Light glanced dangerously off its sharp edges, mocking them with its smoothness. Optimus could feel Megatron tensing like a locking mechanism and gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

Their feet took the first step in unison. Optimus kept his balance easily while Megatron scrambled for purchase on his equilibrium.

"Don't look down," Optimus said. "Step with me."

And they moved together, two unwitting circus tightrope walkers toeing the razor's edge between life and death.

"You're doing just fine."

"Stop--coddling me." Megatron growled. His voice lacked its usual confidence and his grip was iron. Then his foot slipped and he barely...*barely*...suppressed the yelp Optimus knew hung like a fog around his vocal processing unit. The servos in his hand clamped down until every joint nearly crumbled from the pressure.

Beneath their feet, the narrow walkway jiggled. Optimus noticed the opposite side looked a little higher than he remembered. The block jolted a second time, wrenching them another foot lower.

Optimus realized this was A Very Bad Thing.

"Uh...Megatron? Can we..." He chose his words carefully, afraid that alarming Megatron would place them in worse danger, "...can we hurry up a little?"

Another jolt rocked the entire path.

Megatron lost his footing.

Optimus collapsed sideways, the sharp peak of the walkway digging painfully into his side as he bore Megatron's full weight on his right arm. Megatron never screamed, but the look on his face was sheer, slack-jawed terror.

*Don't let me fall, those eyes said. Please, whatever you do, don't let me fall!*

"Brace your feet on the side!" Optimus yelled. The hydraulics in his arm were reaching critical pressure. If they ruptured...he didn't want to think about it. "When I tell you to, start walking. I'll pull you up!"

Megatron's fingers shook so hard it was a wonder he kept his grip. Optimus' own Spark throbbed uncomfortably within its chamber. He couldn't lose Megatron like this!

"Megatron!"

"I--I'll fall if I move..."

"You'll fall if you *don't* move! Help me help you!"

Optimus saw Megatron's legs kick out and rest against the wall. He grabbed his forearm, willing whatever strength still left in his system to hold out a little longer. Progress was slow and slippery. Optimus almost tumbled backwards once he got Megatron back on his feet. The walkway crumbled around them--and if they didn't get across soon, they'd never reach the ledge on the other side.

"We're sinking!" Megatron gasped, shivering. "You idiot! We're sinking! You should have dropped me! Your foolish compassion is going to kill us both!"

"Stop it!" Optimus kicked himself the second he shouted. Telling Megatron not to panic while panicking himself wouldn't help matters! His growing terror bled right through their joined hands. He felt Megatron rush forward and followed before his own balance wavered. The metal beneath his feet seemed more slippery than a greased axel. He lived in constant terror that they'd both topple.

And then, suddenly, they were at the other side. The walkway juddered downwards another six feet.

Optimus shoved Megatron against the flat ledge. "I'll give you a boost."

"You'll fall!"

"I can stand on this, I just can't walk on it. Let me help you up. Then you can pull me up."

Another inch lower...Optimus gritted his teeth.

"Fine..." Megatron growled. "But you're a fool to place so much trust in me."

"Not a good time to argue."

"Touché."

Optimus angled his feet so they pointed out to either side and slowly, delicately, squatted with his fingers interlocked like a platform. Megatron stepped backwards onto it. Optimus strained the servos in his legs and shoulders as he shoved the heavier mech up towards the platform. Megatron hauled himself over the edge. Optimus lunged and caught the ledge a millisecond before the entire walkway crumbled. He felt the chain holding the backpack on his shoulder break, but couldn't do a thing to stop it. The energon they so carefully mined plunged into the sickening muck below, and a faint purple glow filled the chamber as the energon cubes melted away. Hissing punctuated those future



meals reacting with the acid. Six months of fuel cut down to six weeks for two bots--and that was if they rationed their intake to a cube a day.

Pieces of the ledge broke away. All Optimus could hear was the sizzle of metal much like his armor melting into slag.

And now, the only thing between him and the same demise was the three feet of ledge under his fingertips. He gazed up into the unreadable visage of his rival. Megatron hadn't moved since the walkway fell. His crimson optics were more frigid than the coldest planets in the universe. He knelt, like he probably had so long ago in the mines, and peered down at Optimus. Shadows of the past flickered across his dirty face.

Optimus looked up. "Megatron..."

No response beyond a frozen stare. Fear or anger, Optimus couldn't tell.

"Ever since I heard your name, I've longed to see you in this position, Optimus." Megatron began, his voice a monotone. "My next action will determine whether you live or die. I have your life in my grasp. I have control of your fate."

Optimus' fingers began to slip. "M-Megatron..." He hated himself for begging the moment the plea left his lips, "...please..."

"I see terror in your eyes, Optimus..."

A sharp retort burned on Optimus' glossa, but he bit it back. His position didn't allow for arguing. He *was* afraid...did he put too much faith in Megatron? Would Megatron really damn himself to a lonely existence ending in the extinction of all Cybertronians *just to say he won their war?*

The light in Megatron's eyes darkened.

Optimus lost his grip.

His fall ended nearly before it began, halted by the hand roughly grabbing his wrist. He looked up, simultaneously shocked and grateful.

Megatron's full lips formed the twisted parody of a smile. "There are some deaths I wouldn't wish on anyone." He frowned, pulling Optimus upwards. "This is one of them."

They collapsed together on top of the ledge. Optimus landed across Megatron's chest, gasping just as hard as his rival, but the moment left him too emotionally drained to move--and Megatron made no efforts at shoving him away. Through the corner of his eye, he saw Megatron's fangs gleaming between his slightly parted lips. He made every effort *not* to stare, but such a task proved difficult when he had no other direction to look.

"Thanks, Megatron," Optimus said, hoping his words filled the odd silence.

Megatron smirked. "Thanks for not dropping you?"

Optimus picked his head up and met Megatron's eyes, "I guess."

"Don't read too much into it. If you weren't about to fall into *acid*, I would have left you there."

For some reason, Optimus found that funny. "Then I'm glad it was acid."

Both laughed, though it didn't dispel the odd new tension edging into existence.

The smirk on Megatron's face faltered. Optimus stopped laughing and mirrored his unexpected frown.

Something in the air between them grew suddenly warmer, drawing them closer. Optimus heard Megatron's intakes quiet and forced his own to follow. The tangible heat became a gravity well whose event horizon he'd already crossed. It scared him--this instant--as he let his eyes follow the long scar marring Megatron's serious features. He could *smell* the traces of lead and nickel in the solder. Or was that scent part of Megatron's natural odors, which was a mix of oil, warm metal and hydraulic fluid?

He felt his face inch closer to those smells, breathing, aching, submerging, until blue lips touched gray.

Optimus' mind reeled. This wasn't occurring. He wasn't kissing his enemy. Megatron's lips weren't silky smooth and beautiful against his own. He *wasn't*--

Megatron moaned in...relief?...and tilted his head. Optimus felt a rough tongue brush the edges of his lips, and the reality he once knew crumbled the moment his own glossa rose to meet it. Optimus tasted the dangerous peaks and valleys of Megatron's impressive fangs and the smoothness on the roof of his mouth.

Everything hung like a fireball between their dueling tongues. What they once were, what they were now and what they would be existed all at once in a single, sizzling Spark-beat.

They drew back an inch and Optimus saw his own realization reflected in the other's glistening eyes. Bitter awareness crashed like thunder, opening an invisible valley. Autobots and Decepticons were oil and water. Autobots and Decepticons *did not fall for each other*. This was *wrong*.

Megatron shoved Optimus aside and scrambled upright. He put several paces between their bodies. Optimus backed against the wall, grasping it to keep reality in phase. He still tasted Megatron on his aching lips.

What had they *done*?

"This..." Megatron stammered, "Th-this never happened." Except his eyes didn't match his voice. There was something so desperate and vulnerable in them that Optimus wanted nothing more than to reach out and relive that kiss all over again. Yet, simultaneously, he, too, almost convinced himself the previous sixty seconds didn't actually happen. They...they were enemies...leaders of opposing factions.

Factions that no longer existed.

The grief Optimus spent their journey suppressing threatened his self-control. He and Megatron...no other Cybertronians existed beyond them. The end of their lives marked the end of their kind. What point was there to continue their hatred?

*...he's a **Decepticon**.*

Decepticons are dirty.

*Decepticons are the enemy.*

Old prejudices didn't just die because someone wanted them to.

*...but the Autobots created them, and I ignorantly let it continue.*

Optimus bit his tongue *hard* so he wouldn't shed tears. This was just so *wrong*.

Megatron turned away, gazing out over the domed ceiling and mirrored surfaces. He laid his hand over the emergency food cylinder attached to his side by magnets. His expression remained unreadable. Did this moment hurt him, too?

"Megatron?"

"I remember the grand Cyber City cathedral. The Primusian one with the golden spire setting it apart from the surrounding structures." Megatron said, avoiding Optimus' curious stare. "My first day on the surface, I stood at its base and looked into the window. It was all cloisters and mirrors like this. That was the day I understood the concept of 'sparkle.'"

"I remember it." Optimus replied. "I--"

"And the tower..." Megatron went on as if he hadn't heard. He touched the wall, peering intently at his own reflection. "...every sound inside resonated all the way down into the mines. Even before I saw the sun, I knew when it was rising by listening. I waited every single day just to hear the morning chanter sing the sun into the sky. *Everyday*, Prime, and I'm not even religious. He had the most beautiful voice I ever heard. His replacement wasn't anywhere near as talented."

Nodding, Optimus sympathized because he missed those shining mornings where he filled the city with his voice. If there was anything he could give back to Megatron, it was *that*...but he didn't know how. He never liked to boast about his hidden talent. *No one* other than the priests knew he chanted.

"I miss it, too." He admitted. "It was built just perfect inside. Voices spiraled and resonated right to the openings. Incredible sound amplification without electronics."

"Mm. Well...no sense crying over it." Megatron dismissed the subject with a derisive snort and walked towards the narrow opening in the wall. The next chamber was another smooth, silver dome that made his voice ring pleasantly in the silence. Recharge wouldn't be hard--very little light existed, providing a calm, quiet atmosphere. "It's getting late. We should conserve our energy."

"Good idea." Optimus said. He sat against the wall just inside the door.

Not surprisingly, Megatron chose the opposite wall. The glow of his eyes flickered as his systems powered down.

"What will we do about our energon?" asked Optimus.

"Ration."

Optimus began to wonder if there was even a point to that. What if it took months to reach another door? What if nothing awaited them at the end of their journey? What if their hunger drove them into irrationality? What if they killed each other before then?

Was there any hope?

And what about the events in the previous room? They...kissed...and it felt wonderful. Optimus still tasted it on the edges of his lips. He had no idea what possessed him to do that--he should hate Megatron! They were enemies! He was a Prime, for slag's sake, and Primes were supposed to be virginal, pure-Sparked mechs with no desires beyond protecting the Autobot faction. Megatron's scent made him feel carnal things too lustful to think about, but he couldn't stop the rushing desire.

*Maybe I don't deserve the Matrix of Leadership. I...shouldn't have kissed him. Oh, Primus, I feel like I've failed my--*

"For the fourth time, good night, Orion," Megatron's whisper dispelled Optimus' thoughts. The acoustics carried his voice like an amplifier.

"Huh? Oh...uh...good night."

Optimus shut out his thoughts and silence took over.

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Megatron still slept when Optimus' recharge cycle reached completion. He'd flopped backwards against the wall, head back and mouth slack, and Optimus almost laughed at the snoring. Megatron could fall into recharge anywhere.

No sleep seemed restful enough for the weary Autobot leader. Optimus still felt exhausted, as if he didn't get any rest at all. His servos ached from overuse. All of his fluids were due for a change, but with no place to do so, he'd have to continue recycling his wastes and risk sludge building in his engine parts. He yawned to clear his intakes of condensation and checked his internal chronometer to judge whether it was day or night above ground. Keeping track of days and nights gave him something besides Megatron to ponder.

It was exactly daybreak. The horizon would be brilliant blue, foretelling a glorious golden sunrise whose beauty was only matched on Earth.

Megatron shifted in his sleep. His head fell forward, closing his mouth and silencing his snores. Optimus heard him grunt a few times and realized his rival didn't get any rest from his recharge, either. What would someone like Megatron dream about?

There he went again, thinking in directions he shouldn't. He forced his mind to another subject.

*I wonder if Primus ever heard the prayers I sang.* Optimus wondered. He winced at the painful hope in his Spark. *Maybe if I sang a few here...maybe I'd find a reason for all of this.*

He pushed himself onto his feet and tip-toed towards the middle of the room. Even his quietest servos created an achingly familiar cacophony in the chamber. He stood straighter and transported his mind back to the tower, to the fantastic light of the morning streaming in across the mirrored walls. The chants from millennia ago remained burned in his mind, and the day he quit chanting was the day he died a little inside. And when the first few notes fluttered easily past his lips, it felt like time itself ran in reverse. He didn't need to sing very loud. The surrounding chamber caught his voice and swirled it into a tornado of sound. He chanted in Ancient, a language so old only scholars, priests and chanters knew how to read, write or speak it. Many said it was the language of Primus himself.

Optimus let his mind get lost in the rise and fall of his own voice. This was the sound of peace.

The actual chant wasn't as complicated as it sounded. What seemed like a long stream of words was actually the same phrases repeated over and over. It was the echoes that created the illusion of complexity by muddling one phrase into the next.

*"Primus! Ostende nobis misericordiam tuam.*

Clamor ad te veniat meus.

Exaudi orationem meam.

Refugium nostrum et virtus--

et vivificantem--

oremus, Primus!"

Each note clamored off the walls and coiled back into the next line. It sounded as if four people were singing at once. Tones overlapped, folds of sound finding every curve and dancing back to be sent out again.

Optimus knew exactly what he sang about--

Primus! Show us thy mercy.

Let my cry come onto thee.

Hear my prayer.

Our refuge and strength--

the giver of life--

let us pray, Primus!

--and the part of him that hadn't lost faith yet hoped that here, supposedly inside the plating of his own god, his prayers would be heard.

Optimus intoned the prayer three times. First from the lowest part of his voice, then in the middle and at last, from his highest register. He saw Cybertron the way it was before the chaos tore it apart. He saw the people, friends and foes alike--people he'd never see again--and couldn't hold the tears in any longer. They poured from his eyes as freely as the prayers from his mouth. Despite the tears and grief, his voice did not waver. He wouldn't let it.

The song settled his mind into a meditative state of deep prayer. Only his mouth moved to form words. The rest of him stood absolutely still, a statue cast in steel. He grew vaguely aware of hands on his shoulders and a weight against his back, but he didn't stop chanting until the final note passed his lips.

Suddenly, the chamber became as silent as a tomb. Nothing moved.

Megatron's intakes hitched. Optimus didn't turn around. He didn't want to see Megatron cry because people like him weren't supposed to show weakness in front of others.

"If Primus is real. If he exists," Megatron whispered in his audio, "he sings with *that* voice."

Somehow, Optimus smiled through his pain. He let himself reach up and pat the hand clinging tightly to his left shoulder.

"Please...Orion...could I trouble you to sing that one more time?"

Optimus forced himself to turn around and face the other mech. Megatron's expression revealed nothing. There were many tears present, each streak a raw scar bleeding. Faces and sunlight flickered in every golden-hued teardrop. The longing in Megatron's optics hurt worse than losing his entire world.

Optimus caught a droplet on his thumb and tasted a sweetness bordering on bitterness. Right then, he'd do anything to take that pain away, and if singing once more was that *anything*...

He began to chant again, and the joy he saw in Megatron's eyes was the sun peeking through the eye of a hurricane...

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...right before more clouds rushed in.

Everything that took place in the domed chamber stayed there like yesterday's dust.

Silence pervaded as they made their way into a winding corridor so narrow they had to scoot through sideways. Progress was slow, perhaps several hundred feet per day for many days with barely any rest in between. The rough walls scratched their already battered paint jobs, chipped solder off wounds and pressed dents into armor plating.

"Optimus," Megatron grouched, "can't you move any faster?"

"No. Not when I'm on unfamiliar terrain."

"How much further?"

"Not a lot." Optimus ducked awkwardly through the low opening and offered Megatron his hand to help him out. Megatron slapped it away and assisted himself by bracing his palms on the walls. His cannon scraped noisily against the roughened archway, and for a moment it looked like he'd gotten stuck. Only when Optimus "accidentally" bumped his leg into it did Megatron finally emerge.

They stood in a space so small they couldn't avoid touching each other in some form or another. No doors, no paths, no openings...it was a dead end the size of a closet.

A week of shimmying sideways just for *this*?

"And you claimed to have a wonderful sense of direction..." Megatron scoffed. He shoved his way over to the blank wall in their path. It glowed blue while he went on, "Well, Optimus, you've wasted a week of our time and rations. Now wh--AAH!"

"Megatron?" Optimus jolted back as the glow of a warp gate dazzled his optics. "Megatron!"

He tried his radio to no avail--Megatron was beyond his range.

Being completely alone in the tiny room rushed around Optimus like a tsunami. No one to argue with. No voice complaining in his ear. No footsteps echoing his own. He couldn't fathom it. If he didn't leap through the warp gate, he'd condemn himself.

*Alone.*

No choice.

For all Optimus knew Megatron injured himself landing on other side. Or worse...but he refused to consider that alternative.

He stepped forward into the cold sensation of his molecules transporting themselves to another location. The wormhole spat him face-first onto a smooth, purplish-silver ground. He sat up and checked his coordinates. Still on Cybertron, but somewhere beneath the northern hemisphere. Hadn't he and Megatron been under the southern hemisphere? Why was there a warp gate *here*?

Optimus pushed himself up and glanced around. The surrounding area was little more than a tall, narrow cavern bearing another engraved door. He spotted Megatron standing by the doorframe, studying the engraved figures glistening on its silver surface.

"Megatron!" This chamber didn't echo like the last one. "Are you okay?"

Megatron snorted. "I'm made of much sterner stuff than *you* are, Optimus."

Optimus swallowed his rude retort and joined Megatron by the double doors. The engraved figures now stood inside planet Cybertron, holding hands. Their interlocked fingers marked the exact center of the doorway.

Megatron extended his hand without a word, his face more unreadable than ever. He looked so tired...and meeting his eyes let Optimus again see himself--a war-weary, lonely mech dreading the end of their kind.

Optimus grasped the offered hand and tried to flash a reassuring smile, but his lips merely quivered instead.

"We'll be okay," he whispered, and Megatron squeezed his hand.

The door split open without ceremony. No grinding or old joints groaning, just a slow, sideways slide revealing another titanic room. So tall, in fact, that it left the ceiling hidden in darkness.

"Optimus...the walls!"

Optimus stepped between the doors and they closed behind him. He followed Megatron's confused gaze to something he found both fascinating and terrifying.

Their *lives* had been engraved there. Megatron's on the left, Optimus' on the right. The images went on beyond the veil of darkness covering the ceiling and extended onto the floor, merging right when the war intertwined their existences. Even their most recent escapades--the chaos on the surface and their sojourn into the mines--were carved on the floor. The engravings just behind them ended in two figures loitering inside the massive door they just entered.

Gulping, Optimus glanced at the tile under his and Megatron's feet.

It was a featureless silver panel with a mirror finish.

The rest were mirrors as well, and if Optimus stared long enough he swore he saw smoke or fog swirling around the blank tiles directly ahead.

"What is this?" Megatron snarled, looking around. His quick, jerky movements and clenched jaw gave his emotions away. Optimus noticed Megatron tended to cover his fear with anger, and situations he couldn't comprehend or explain scared him almost as much as acid pools. "Is this a joke? I demand an explanation!"

"I wish I could offer you one." Optimus answered. He took a step and light flooded down the corridor, illuminating a silver sphere floating in the massive chamber dead ahead.

Megatron growled and shifted his weight.

Optimus started towards the sphere. It had an almost hypnotic pull—he had to get closer.

"Optimus!"

"It doesn't look dangerous. Come on."

The sphere was twice their height and a perfect model of planet Cybertron in all its former glory. Seeing it sent dull, aching pains across Optimus' Spark. It had been months since he saw the sky...and he was distressed when he realized how dim those memories were becoming as time wore on. They were fading away the same way the walls faded into the too-distant ceiling.

Seeing a model of Cybertron pained Megatron, too. Optimus reached over and laid a hand on his shoulder. The gesture was neither accepted nor refused.

Suddenly, the miniature planet started to rotate. Purple fog rose from the floor, enveloping the sphere in shimmering violet. Everything on the planet's surface crumbled like dust, mimicking exactly the landscape Optimus awoke to. After the last dust grain fell, the heat began. The surface was *molten*, uninhabitable for even the simplest life forms.

Optimus almost averted his optics. He didn't *want* to remember!

And then Optimus heard the Matrix of Leadership speak to him for the first time since he accepted his role as Prime:

***Duobus.***

The voice was a soft tenor as light and insubstantial as morning mist. The sound of it alone brought comfort and well-being.

Duobus.

"Duobus?" Optimus frowned, holding up a hand before Megatron could spit out a harsh comment.

***Pacis venio ut bellum nunquam est.***

"What the...where is that coming from?"

So Megatron *could* hear it as well. He had no grasp of the Ancient language at all, or else he would've understood every word.

"Peace is the war that never happened." Optimus translated out loud. Was this the voice of Primus?



His optics widened. This had to be Primus! "Megatron...it's...it's Primus speaking to us."

"All I hear is mumbling!"

"No. It's Ancient." Optimus struggled to wrap his mind around the reality of the moment. Talking to his god, his creator...what should he say?

Primus spoke first:

***Diligo contemno et sunt perturbatio.***

"Translation?" Megatron growled.

"Love and hate are passion." Optimus gritted his teeth when he found himself losing patience with the riddles. "Oh...holy and ever-living Primus..." he buried his irritation and asked the only question a Prime should ask in this situation. "Can Cybertron be saved?"

***Duobus te...sic.***

Megatron growled. Being so tired and torn up left his temper shorter than Optimus remembered.

"Optimus, *what* is going on? Someone had better explain this madness!"

But Optimus hardly heard him as images flashed over his mind like a holo-movie on fast forward. Glimpses of the war, violence, the surface of Cybertron burning and time itself ripping apart at the seams. Megatron clutched at his head and bellowed for it to stop. Then the sphere in front of them suddenly shattered, opening the path to a shining, golden door. Engraved upon it were two figures.

They were kissing.

***Irae subsisto. Salva me.***

"What did he say?"

"Stop the wrath. Save me." Optimus faced Megatron, glancing over his shoulder towards the golden doors that glowed in an almost holy light. The weight of realization nearly floored him. "Our war is killing Primus, which means it's killing *us*. He did that..." He gestured upwards towards the uninhabitable surface, "...to make us stop fighting."

Horror crossed Megatron's features. "W-what kind of *god* kills his children to stop a war?"

"What kind of people continue to fight when their hatred is poisoning the god that gave them life?" Optimus stepped closer to his almost lifelong rival. "Our fighting, our constant, incessant fighting, did *this!* All of this is our fault! *Our* fault!"

"Optimus, I--"

Optimus forced himself to face all those "wrong" feelings he'd been so painfully aware of when he saw Megatron repairing his own legs. He stared straight into himself, toe to toe with his thoughts on Megatron's unique and attractive facial features. Were his emotions wrong, or were the prejudices he let get in the way wrong?

"Megatron, in all the years we've been fighting, you've had several opportunities to kill me...yet you never took the final shot. Have you ever asked yourself why?"

"Because it would've been pointless. Because--because..." Megatron floundered for words. The

cavern shook around them, raining dust and rocks from the ceiling far above. He dodged the last boulder and snarled as it shattered behind him. "If I'm going to kill you, I want to do it while looking into your eyes!"

"Then *do it*, Megatron!" Optimus grabbed the cannon on Megatron's back and aimed it at his chest. "Do it. Go on."

Again, slack-jawed horror flashed over Megatron's face. He was more afraid of this moment than all the loneliness in existence. A fear Optimus recognized all too well because he felt it, too. Both felt something they'd never admit to because it'd undermine their entire war...and end it. As long as they fought they didn't have to face this moment. They didn't have to face their emotions. They didn't have to face rejection. One word could've stopped the fighting, the dying and the pain. But one word was too easy.

What were they trying to prove? Their battle prowess? Their ability to conquer?

"This is nonsense!" Megatron snarled.

"Then finish me off. If you don't feel a thing for me, finish me off right now, Megatron." He kept his gaze steady on Megatron's eyes, taking in the swirling emotions his words awoke. "Go on. You win. You've won the war, Megatron. Cybertron is yours to conquer. Take it. It's yours!"

Their world continued to tremble, but they remained steady.

"S-stop it!" Megatron backed away a step.

Optimus slipped closer, passing the cannon. "For the longest time I thought I was just infatuated. But Primes aren't supposed to have lusts or desires beyond protecting the people. I spent a long time ashamed and afraid of what I felt. You're my rival. You symbolize everything the Autobots are supposed to hate."

"I hate *you*!" Megatron sneered venomously. "I loathe you, Optimus *Prime*!"

"You say that, but do you believe it?"

"Stop it!"

Optimus moved the cannon aside. "Is it *me* you hate, or is it what I represent?"

"Megatron bared his fangs. "I said *stop it*! Unhand me, now!"

"Megatron," Optimus leaned closer, cupping Megatron's face in his hands and feeling the other's lips tremble. "Let's finish our war."

"Fine!"

And the blinding pain of a fist against his jaw knocked his world off kilter. He landed on his back while Megatron stood over him, his body still twisted in a follow-through. Dull pain spread throughout his face and neck. He got right back up without changing his expression.

"Hit the other side," said Optimus. He turned his head, presenting the other cheek to his rival. "Go on."

Megatron's red optics opened wide. "You're crazy!"

"Do it, Megatron. Hit me again. Maybe--"

Another punch staggered him, but he kept talking.

"--maybe when realize you aren't accomplishing anything--"

An uppercut nearly offlined his sensory circuits. He stumbled until he regained his footing.

"--you'll listen to more than your basic programming."

"Shut UP!"

"Megatron!" Optimus' jaw ached when he snarled, "Look around! We *have* no factions. The people most likely to condemn us are dead! *Dead!* What's stopping us now? Fear?"

"How dare you imply that I'm afraid of *you*," snarled Megatron, his tone low and dangerous.

Optimus backhanded him. It was the hardest he'd ever hit another living being in his life, and knowing he enjoyed the pain he caused frightened him a little.

The purple mech fell backwards against the wall. His head rolled as he tried to remain online. Optimus waited patiently for him to recover.

Megatron regained himself quickly. Almost *too* quickly.

In a flash he jumped up and swung his fists one after the other, only to have them caught in Optimus' grasp. He struggled fruitlessly, and for a moment Optimus pitied him. All his life he only knew hardship, violence and struggle. His life and the way the Autobots treated his kind made him into a monster.

But some monsters...a very scant few...were still good people deep down. Their Sparks were in the right place, but their actions painted the wrong picture about who they were. Megatron was one of those.

Optimus grinned, flashing his straight, white teeth. He saw his opening. "It's not me you're afraid of, is it? It's what you see when you look at me...you see yourself, don't you?"

The stony silence was all the answer he needed. Flinging Megatron's fists aside, Optimus lunged and captured that full, round mouth with his own. He could taste Megatron's rage on the very tip of his tongue. Megatron resisted with all the fire in his being...before suddenly grasping Optimus' head in both hands and kissing violently back. Optimus felt those dangerously pointed teeth scrape against the sensitive inner surfaces of his lips. He bit Megatron's bottom lip and a growling moan vibrated his teeth.

"Harder," Megatron grunted. Optimus obliged.

Reality performed a loop and he found himself slammed against the wall, a ravenous mouth full of fangs working its way across his throat. All over his neck cables, he felt pinching nips and suckling like those blood-sucking fantasy creatures from human horror films--he couldn't remember what they were called in his deliriously aroused state. Sharp purple fingers screeched clumsily across his battered, scratched plating. He heard the coolant roaring past his audios and cycled air faster to keep his internal temperature from rising too high. His whole body tingled on the verge of something wonderful. Nothing about the way Megatron handled him was gentle. None of this happened like he imagined...

...it was *better*.

"You are too easy to arouse, Optimus," Megatron looked up, desire glowing within his eyes like subdued flames. He leaned in, snarling, for another kiss.

"Let's end the war." Optimus whispered between lip locks. The hands tangling in his chest grill didn't help his train of thought. "L-Let's stop it right now. If we're going to die here...do you really want *hate* to be the last emotion you feel? Do you want to die lying to yourself?"

Megatron pulled back, glaring. "People like us aren't meant to love."

Optimus touched the thin line of energon trickling over his rival's nose. Backhanding him opened the scar he'd soldered and it shed paper-thin tears. "But we can *learn*. Remember the doors?" He gazed into Megatron's red optics, grasped his hand and gently kissed him again. "Just like the carvings."

"But--all this time--fighting...I can't just let it go like this. Everything we've done in the past has been pointless! I can't just let go!"

"Yes, you can. I'd prefer it that way. It's..." Optimus smiled at the irony and rubbed his aching jaw, "...less painful."

But Megatron shoved him away and stormed over to the open golden door, shaking his head. "This is absurd! I feel like we've been enemies since the dawn of time! And you expect me to drop everything? Have you blown a processor?"

"You say that when you've stared at my unmasked face every time you thought I didn't notice."

Megatron averted his eyes. "So you have a nice face."

"I always thought you were pretty attractive."

"Don't joke with me. It's an Autobot trait to consider Decepticons hideous."

"I got fed lines about how miners are supposed to be disfigured, dirty mechs. I believed it until I saw you. You...never struck me as ugly."

Megatron brushed a finger against the scar marring most of his face. "My appearance has always been a source of pride for me. But now...my paint is almost scratched off. I'm missing pieces. I'm scarred--"

Optimus chuckled. "You still turn my head."

The poisonous look shot his way only made him laugh more.

Megatron kept glaring as he stalked through the doorway, and Optimus had to follow quickly before the door closed. The events that just took place remained behind the doorway they just entered. Optimus obeyed Megatron's tacit signals to drop it.

Realizing why sent pain shooting across Optimus' Spark.

*Megatron doesn't think he deserves another's love. He reacts the way he does because he doesn't know anything else.*

"Optimus, come on! Stop staring into space!"

"I wasn't--"

"Then close your mouth and start walking."

Embarrassed, he shut his mouth--ignoring the residual soreness in his mandible joints--and tried not to think about the buzzing arousal Megatron set off in his electrical system. Impure thoughts raced through his mind, threatening his ability to think clearly. Only when he forced his memory chips towards images of the surface did his desire plummet to tolerable levels. He looked around once he'd cleared his head.

They stood within tall, round chamber absolutely covered in Ancient glyphs. The marks were so close together that Optimus couldn't quite tell where one sentence ended and another began. Strange, green light glowed between the cracks in the aged walls.

The only direction they could go was down a long, winding spiral staircase, a trip Optimus spent trying to discern the elaborate writing all over the golden-hued walls. It was as if every word ever spoken had been documented somewhere in the room. He stopped to stare, forgetting for a moment that Megatron went on without him. The other mech's footsteps clanged into the distance. Optimus didn't notice Megatron was gone until he heard his footsteps come rushing back up the stairs.

"Optimus!" Megatron growled, "Stop gawking at the walls and get down here!"

"What in the world is your pr--" Optimus' words died at the strange gleam in Megatron's eyes.  
"What?"

"I..." Megatron bit his lip. He had the haunted appearance of someone whose entire belief system was turned upside down. His hands were shaking.

"Megatron?" Optimus hedged.

Looking up, Megatron voiced the impossible.

"I saw Primus."

What Megatron said hung in the air like a ghost. How could that be possible? The planet was Primus! Optimus had been taught that ever since his Spark-ling days!

"Isn't *this* Primus?" Optimus rapped gently on the wall.

"Are you an idiot?" Another snarl. "Shut up and come on!"

It was Megatron's serious expression and urgent tone that told Optimus he'd better listen.

The stairs were dizzyingly steep and Megatron took them at a pace Optimus wouldn't dream of. It took several minutes to reach the bottom, which looked like a simple well with a metal cover over the top.

Megatron indicated a tiny hole in the cover's center. Optimus peered inside and--sure enough--a figure identical to Primus lay on its back at the bottom.

A sound sent him scrambling backwards into Megatron's chest. For once, Megatron didn't offer a sharp retort. They watched as the cover swung upwards and the "well" descended into the floor, leaving the prone figure lying on a low recharge berth. Optimus and Megatron had to kneel just to look at him.

Primus was...*beautiful*...his armor ornate in shades of blue, silver and gold, and his gleaming, innocent face looked too young to belong on a being as old as the universe. Though he was lying down, the rival mechs could tell he was at least twice their height, if not larger.

Optimus reached out, hesitated and laid his hand on Primus' smooth cheek. Touching the pure, clean face of his god with such a filthy hand sent a strange pang through his Spark. He felt somehow...unworthy...which prompted him to draw back and meet Megatron's eyes.

"Can he hear us?" Megatron asked.

"I think s--"

"Yes..." The figure on the berth interrupted. His voice was weak, barely above a whisper. It took Optimus a moment to realize Primus was speaking the standard language. "I can always hear you. Your thoughts, your dreams and your desires. I know them all."

Terror crossed Megatron's expression. He ducked his head in apparent shame, his hands rising to cover his face. Primus turned towards him. He lifted a delicate black hand and cupped the back of Megatron's head.

"No, no...I won't strike you down, little one! I don't condemn those who do not believe in my existence. Their Sparks are here with the believers--but--I have so little time..." he paused, flinching, his face tensing in a rictus of pain. "The Allspark itself has grown unstable. Sparks are no longer neutral. They are coming into being as one faction or the other, battling even before they have bodies. The fighting has poisoned my life force, my ability to create. It is why you see me in this body--I am conserving what little power I have left to speak to you."

"Our doing," Optimus whispered. "All of this...it's our doing."

Primus nodded his head, his optics dull. "Yes."

Megatron clutched Primus' hand in both of his own. Optimus had to look away because he couldn't bear the sight of Megatron's walls crumbling.

"Optimus. Look at him."

"I...I can't."

"You must," Primus smiled softly, "He is your mirror."

Megatron was weeping. He did it silently, trying to hide it, but the mech fluid trickled in golden streams down his dirty face. Optimus watched them slide almost sensually over his cheeks, nose and lips, leaving clean streaks where shiny metal showed through the grime. "I shouldn't care. I shouldn't *care*. I wanted to conquer. To rule. To hold this world and every other in my grasp! I don't understand why I--"

"You're Cybertronian, Megatron." Optimus said. He felt the prick of tears on the surfaces of his optics. And what Primus meant suddenly hit with a truth that nearly floored him. "You're feeling what I'd feel in your position. And I..."

Between them, Primus nodded his crowned head. "I can not be saved...but the Allspark *can*. You must be willing."

"Allspark? But...Primus! That's--that's your life force! Your Spark! You can't survive without it!"

"You're half-correct, Optimus. *I* can't survive without it, but it can survive without *me*. Then...time can heal."

"This doesn't make any sense!" Megatron smashed his fist against the berth. He'd been quiet up until then, and the tears left his voice rougher than usual. "Stop talking riddles! You're a *god*, aren't you? If you truly held the power of creation in your hands, you could *make* the Sparks do your bidding! You should mold time to your will and--"

"Oh, Megatron...if only it were that simple." Primus chuckled the way human fathers chuckled at unruly children on Earth. He looked over at Megatron with nothing but love in his eyes. "You see time as a single line. It is a...mortal thing..." He gasped, again appearing to be in pain. "Time is multidimensional...it is infinite. Every choice you make opens another possibility. Your choices don't simply lead forward--they go backwards, left, right, up, down and diagonally. Time curves and curls around us like scratches in paint. But sometimes, when things go wrong...a poor choice...or ignorance that allows hatred to continue...that is when time itself suffers a fatal wound. It can unravel, dashing destinies and tearing lives apart. Nothing can resolve it other than to find the moment it all went wrong and make it right. Do you have any idea how two people can affect the universe?" He flinched again, gasping, "You two...you caused the rift with your war. You can also heal it...you can save this world and thousands more."

"No! This is...insanity! Time is immutable! How can we, as mortals, change what has already happened?" Megatron narrowed his optics.

"Megatron! Were you even listening?" Optimus gazed balefully across the berth before turning once more to the prone figure lying between them. "My apologies. What do you mean by 'healing time?'"

"Exactly what I said. If you don't..." Primus winced again, as if the short, angry exchange Optimus and Megatron just had somehow hurt him, "...Cybertron will die. The Allspark itself will cease to be--and so will you. There will be no afterlife, no promise of rebirth, no *dreams*...all will be lost. It will spread through the universe like a virus. Worlds will perish. Space will become a cold, lifeless void.

From this universe it will spread to others. All existence...everything...rests in your hands."

The words were a cold reality ringing in Optimus' ears. He leaned over Primus, desperate for answers. "How can we correct this?"

And Primus met his gaze, his soft expression flickering with sagely wisdom.

"You must unite the Allspark again. Time will heal itself when all are one."

"And how do we do that?" Optimus hedged, ignoring Megatron's heated glare.

"With the ultimate act." Primus replied simply.

They were just words...yet their effect was like a punch to the head.

Megatron lost his balance and crashed onto his side. It would've been funny if the situation wasn't deathly serious. He reluctantly accepted the hand Primus offered and pulled himself back into a kneeling position.

"People like us aren't meant to love," Megatron spoke once he'd regained his dignity. "We aren't--"

"You can't hide from me." An amused grin split Primus' flawless face. His teeth were small, shiny and perfectly straight. "You followed the doors."

Megatron's teeth clenched in frustration. "We copied the carvings. Any fool can do that!"

"What about the mornings you spent listening to his chant? And you..." He turned now to Optimus, his smile never faltering, "What about the moment you studied his face in the tunnels? What about the kiss in my digestive chamber? What about your behavior in the room before this one?"

"Simple lust!" snarled Megatron.

Primus' smile faded, but his eyes and voice remained gentle. "Then what stopped you from ending your war? What held back the countless final shots you could have taken during the course of your battles? The markings on your bodies?"

Nothing Primus said had been snapped or spoken sharply, but the last statement rang with the tell-tale tone of reprimanding. Both Optimus and Megatron ducked their heads, too sheepish to speak.

"All you need...all that is necessary...is for you to acknowledge what you feel. Lay down your pride for a few minutes and *feel* what is there. The rest will be easy."

Gracefully, Primus raised his left hand and splayed it against Megatron's chest. He did the same to Optimus with his right. His optics glowed brilliant red. The grooves in the ground beneath their feet shone blue-white a split second before billions of Sparks swirled up from the metal floor. They looked like stars glistening in the darkness and cast beautiful reflections across Megatron's optics.

"I give you my life. Use it to save yours." Primus whispered. His innards revved audibly, and his face twisted without losing its odd beauty. He groaned, rolling his head side to side in obvious agony. The Sparks in the room whirled along his arms to slam into Optimus and Megatron's chests.

Both mechs screamed in surprise and pain as the thoughts, dreams and memories of over a billion mechs flooded their bodies. Light rays burst from their eyes and open mouths. No words could measure the pain jangling their bodies. Did Primus suffer this agony every second of their ceaseless war?



It went on forever...and ended in a nanosecond.

Megatron wobbled and collapsed. Primus' hand cupped his back and guided him to lie on the ground.

Optimus didn't remember passing out. One moment he was on his knees and the next, his sensory systems flickered online. He saw how the beautiful blue, gold and silver had faded from Primus' body, leaving him the dull gray of death. His optics were still glowing faintly in the darkened room. The sound his intakes made...the clicking rattle of condensation forming where it shouldn't...made Optimus' systems run cold.

Death. That sound meant *death*. Primus was *dying*. The very being who gave life to Cybertron was about to *die*.

Primus tugged gently on Optimus and Megatron, pulling them to lie against his chest like children.

"Tell me your greatest regrets. You need not speak, just think."

Optimus felt something cold open behind his Spark as he clung to his creator's armor, fighting back grief.

*My greatest regret is failing to stop the mining situation. I should have looked into it...information about it passed my desk countless times. I always thought the situation would resolve itself. And when it didn't, I fought them. Rather than listen to their side of the issue...I chose to fight! They wanted freedom and my own foolish prejudices, the thrill I got from battle...I made the wrong choice. My ignorance started this war. It's my fault! I'm...I'm so sorry...Primus, forgive me. I've killed you...*

What was Megatron thinking throughout all of this? He seemed to just lay there, staring into space while Primus cradled him. His face, as usual, appeared cold. Perhaps that was his natural, relaxed expression--Decepticons were always rumored to have faces "angry over nothing."

Optimus wondered if he'd been wrong about all those times he thought he'd angered Megatron. Was he always glaring, or were his eyes just naturally cold? Did the scar marring his visage render his expression a perpetual scowl? Had his own foolish, pre-conceived notions blinded him yet again because Megatron didn't broadcast his emotions like an Autobot?

What would a person like him regret?

Optimus' thoughts halted when he felt Primus kiss his brow and turn away to offer the same to Megatron.

"All is forgiven, my creations." Primus laid back on the berth, and the little strength he had left bled away into oblivion.

Megatron turned his head a fraction of a degree and met Optimus' gaze. It wasn't his eyes that sent a message--it was his hands...they clung against Primus' chest as if his life depended on it.

Primus went on in a gentle whisper, "I leave the rest up to you. Save this world. Save me. Stop the fighting. Please...for everyone's sake...for your own...you, who were once the bitterest enemies...must...*love*."

Optimus reached out and laid his hand over one of Megatron's. Through the corner of his eye, he saw Primus' optics go dark. The large hands resting on their backs slipped free, having nowhere to fall but out to either side. Beneath their joined hands, Primus' chest plates trembled faintly before

becoming still.

Shuddering, Optimus tried to tell himself that only Primus' body was dead. His Spark, the Allspark, still lived on. But...*he* died so *all those Sparks* had a chance at survival.

The Autobot leader heard himself weeping quietly in the silence. He didn't even remember starting to cry. Everything he'd suffered through--the faces of people long gone, the fading memories and, now, the death of his god--seemed to catch up in one fell swoop. He gave up on trying to be strong in front of his rival...he just put his head down and sobbed.

"What good is conquering a world without people to rule?" Megatron wondered out loud, his voice flat. He wasn't dismissing...Optimus realized...they just didn't share the same views on death and grief. Autobots mourned while Decepticons seemed to spare only a silent moment before moving on. They had to move on because their work demanded it. Because the *upper class* didn't care if the *underground scum* died.

"Optimus..." He went on, not meeting Optimus' eyes, "do you recall the conversation we had about relationships?"

Why would he bring that up *now*?

"Yes."

"I have all the time in the world." He chuckled, and it sounded bitter. "And I'm trapped in this Prim--this room--with the only person I ever fantasized about interfacing with." His chuckle erupted into all-out laughter. "Can you imagine how hard a secret like that is to keep from your men?"

Optimus couldn't bring himself to discuss sex in the presence of Primus' dead body. It seemed sacrilegious. He sat up and slowly, gently, folded Primus' hands respectfully on top of his abdomen. Then he watched as the corpse crumbled into dust the second he and Megatron stepped away from the berth. The particles fell through the grooves in the floor and disappeared. Not a single mote remained.

It brought Optimus to his knees. He saw nothing beyond flashbacks of their world's ravaged surface. How long had Primus suffered before this moment? How long had he suffered because of *them*?

Megatron's mocking air deflated. He shook his head in amazement. "I'll never understand how Autobots survived while dwelling on a loss."

Optimus stood out of his memories. He managed a tiny half-smile. "I don't think I'll ever figure out how Decepticons could have sex and go to back work five minutes after losing someone close."

"If you'll excuse the pun...I believe we're both *prime* examples of our lifestyles."

That made Optimus snicker in spite of himself. Megatron was trying to make him feel better...how strange! He never thought Megatron had any motivational skills, yet here he was, trying to help him transcend a horrible moment.

And there wasn't a body left...just an empty berth large enough for two average-sized mechs to recharge side by side. Optimus knew what uniting the Allspark again entailed. He never, in his wildest dreams, imagined such an act would *save the world*. Especially when it involved the very mech he'd been fighting for the last eight million years.

Megatron sat down on the berth, pulled the cylinder off his waist and overturned it. The last energon cube rattled until it fell into his open palm. He stared dejectedly at it before holding it out to Optimus.

"Um..."

"Oh, shut up. You'd do the same. I know you too well."

"You haven't had any rations for three days."

"And you've gone four. Take it, Optimus."

It seemed stupid to fight over who was more altruistic, but Optimus still felt guilty. Besides, one cube wouldn't stave off the inevitable. Even with a long recharge, the act of intercourse required more energy than they had. The next time they laid down to recharge afterward would be the last.

And they both knew it.

Would they know if they succeeded? Would the universe notice before hate tore it apart? Would it know what happened if it survived?

Pondering hurt Optimus' CPU. He accepted the meager, bite-sized cube and palmed it. The power it offered was negligible at best.

"It's over." Megatron whispered.

Optimus nodded and sat down beside him. He looked over, and had to refresh his visual relays several times to make sure his optics weren't deceiving him. Where were Megatron's Decepticon sigils?

"Megatron...your markings."

"What about them?" Megatron frowned, "Where are yours? They couldn't have chipped off...oh," he flashed his fangs in a quick grin that disappeared just as quickly.

Suddenly, the room seemed awkward. Or was it the silence? Neither seemed to know what to say now that they weren't locked in battle.

"You liked what I did to you in the other room." Megatron said.

"I think I'm going to recharge for awhile," Optimus cut the line of thought off. To avoid making Megatron angry, he added, "You should, too. We're probably going to burn a lot of energy and you have less fuel in your tanks than I do."

"You love to stall, Optimus." Megatron grouched. He flopped down on his back with a loud clang that rang like a bell in the quiet chamber.

Optimus settled beside him--mildly dismayed at having no room to rest without their shoulders touching--and stared upwards at the text covering the walls. Even his Ancient knowledge wouldn't let him decipher it. Maybe it was a language even older than Ancient.

Again, it grew quiet, only for Megatron to break it one more time.

"All my life, I've known nothing but work and war. I don't know what it means to be gentle...I don't know what love is...I don't think I know nearly as much as I thought I did. I...don't know how to live without war."

"We'll learn," Optimus said, hoping he didn't sound silly. "You've learned a lot. You gave me the last cube when you could've easily taken it yourself."

"Tch! Your fuel's lower than mine. I process a lot slower than you."

"That's not the point. You gave something up. I've never seen you do that, Megatron."

Optimus felt rather than saw Megatron roll his optics in the dark.

"Good night, Orion."

"Good night."

Except recharge eluded Optimus. Judging by the whirring servos on his left, Megatron had the same problem. He found himself afraid to even twitch and make his presence obvious again. What they would do in the next few hours...fantasizing was one thing, but reality? He hadn't had time to wrap his mind around how he'd touch Megatron, let alone make love to him.

*I'll just cross that bridge when I come to it. Maybe--*

Megatron moved.

Optimus hurriedly shut his optics off to appear asleep. He felt the other's eyes on him--curse it, why did he always turn his head towards his left whenever he slept?

"Optimus," Megatron whispered.

Optimus continued his façade. He kept his breath cycles slow. The other mech's oil, hydraulic fluid and hot metal scents mixed into the smell of dust flooding his olfactory sensors. Usually, dusty smells were considered offensive...they were signs of unseemliness...yet on Megatron's body, it sent Optimus' excitement soaring.

A pointed fingertip traced the smooth hollow beneath his bottom lip.

"I have two regrets...one was failing to save Twister from the acid. It isn't the death I regret so much as letting my own fear get the better of me. However...there is one sin more grievous than anything I've done in my lifetime. I believe the Ancient phrase for such a blight is *mea culpa*...heh, there, now you know the only Ancient phrase I can say." Then he paused, sighing, "I can't forgive myself for silencing your chant. Your voice was the only peace I ever knew."

This was Megatron without his battle lust. This was Megatron, thinking he was talking to a mech who couldn't hear him. This was Megatron, feeling. His words meant more than the tears Optimus saw him shed because they were things he'd never say face to face, but felt all the same. Right then, Megatron proved he *did* care--he just wasn't the type to show it because most Decepticons just didn't operate that way.

But *this* moment, he was open like a flicker of sunlight between angry cumulonimbus clouds. Optimus knew if he didn't walk through that doorway now, Megatron would close off again. The sex would be meaningless and empty.

He lunged and captured the mouth so near his own, bringing his optics slowly online only after making contact. Megatron's lips were sweet with lacrimation--the dried trails created in *love* for their dying god--and the smooth space inside was even hotter. He floundered until he finally drowned in the fiery need working itself through his processors.

If this was wrong, the universe could strike him down and he wouldn't care.

"Mmph!" Megatron gave a startled jolt as Optimus' teeth and tongue assaulted his mouth. Optimus

drew back a few inches to let him cycle air. Their eyes locked when they breathed each others' breath. The reflection Optimus saw no longer frightened him--the lives they led made them what they were--and the worst sin they ever committed was denying this moment for so long.

"Touch me like you did in the other room." Optimus whispered against Megatron's lips.

"I detect a fetish." That grin again, quick and sharp as a razor blade. His optics shimmered like garnets in the low light when he squinted. "Since when did you enjoy having someone else dominate you?"

"Um...since you handled me the way you did back there."

Megatron's smile tightened, allowing his fangs to peek out. "Iiiiiinteresting--" the way he dragged out the word against Optimus' audio nearly sent Optimus over the edge, "I like to dominate. If I'd known it was *this* easy..." He let it hang, but the irony wasn't lost. "I never expected you to like bottoming."

Optimus shrugged one shoulder. "I didn't know until today. I spent so much time ordering other people around. I...was tired of it. No one ever asked about my personal wants and needs...just what I wanted them to *do*."

That dangerous mouth was closing in on his throat. "And I suppose I've been resenting having orders given to me so much that I enjoy making people do my bidding."

"We're so opposite."

"Indeed."

Then Megatron bit down and Optimus' thoughts derailed in fireworks and tingling and sensations he had no names for. He wanted to moan, but wondered if he'd sound easy if he gave away his excitement too soon. In his private, soundproof quarters, he used to mewl and writhe and cry out as he brought himself to overload. But in someone else's presence? Could he ever expose himself that way?

His question answered itself when Megatron dragged one finger straight down the center of his chest grill, jangling sensors connected directly to his Spark chamber. The first involuntary moan slipped past his lips. One fingertip became two. Two became three. On and on until ten digits played him like a finely tuned instrument. And Megatron just watched him like a hungry predator waiting for the right moment to pounce.

Optimus quickly learned that Decepticons were not subtle when it came to interfacing. While he laid there, fantasizing and doubting, Megatron was *doing* everything he probably imagined up until now.

Lips, tongue and fingers teased his grill. He'd given away its weakness and Megatron capitalized. Throughout it all, Optimus tried not to think about those stupid notions of how *wrong* this should be, but he didn't want to do this solely because it was a necessity. He told himself to stop seeing Megatron as his enemy and act on the swirling emotions he'd been bottling since Primus-knows-when.

"Hmph, this is not the time to be shy. Come on, Orion!" Megatron grinned, licking his own fangs. His optics never warmed, never softened, yet they had a strange passion in them very much like his battle lust.

Optimus sat bolt upright, glaring back--the red optic Megatron had given him glowed harshly in the dim room. "Then give me a minute."

"What?"

"Just...please."

Megatron moved aside, frowning.

Optimus yanked the grill completely off his chest, exposing his Matrix of Leadership. The very object that ended his days as Orion Pax and transformed him into Optimus Prime. Its central jewel had crumbled apart. Without Primus, it was a useless piece of jewelry, nothing more. He removed it and laid it on the floor.

*This moment belonged to Orion Pax.*

His gaze drifted to his dirty, scratched and empty hands. Most of the vibrant paint had been stripped off his outer plating. Scratches left rough lines on his previously flawless cheeks and chin stud. He had a dent in the tip of his nose. Filth crusted in the seams of his armor, and he'd never get it off without undergoing an all-body overhaul.

But Megatron was in similar shape. The savage scar on his face cut like a valley across his once-pristine features. His intact antenna was bent and chipped. Most of the purple on his arms and legs was scraped off or peeling, exposing silver-gray base metal. Dirt and dust covered everything else so completely it'd be impossible to clean off without a complete sand and repaint.

None of it seemed to bother Megatron. His optics still shone like flaming suns full of pride.

And *that*, Optimus realized, was what made him so attractive. His *pride*, his ability to look utterly regal while covered in dirt, dents and scratches.

Turning, he covered Megatron's mouth with his own. He tasted his fangs, the insides of his cheeks and the smooth roof of his mouth. Then he drew back, holding his former rival's gaze while licking his taste off his lips. What a strange feeling...to feel so *alive* when he'd be dead in less than two hours.

*There are worse ways to die*, Optimus reminded himself.

Megatron's glossa swiped his lips as if sampling a fine flavor. His frowning mouth curved in a smirk that exposed one gleaming fang. "So much for recharge."

Optimus laughed, no longer self conscious of Megatron staring at him.

"You always laugh with your entire face." Megatron said, sliding closer. Primus, how did he seem to know exactly what to do?

"Part of the reason I had the mask."

"Yes...it makes sense."

They were stalling, and knew it.

Optimus bent forward and tasted the sweet, dried tear residue marking Megatron's cheek plates. Every kiss was a benediction. He wanted to love. He wanted to forgive.

*I can forgive you...but can you forgive me?*

His answer was the slow glide of lips brushing his mouth in silent atonement--

*Forgiven...*

--right before hands slammed him back-first into the berth. Once again those fierce, clawed fingers were upon his body, wrenching soft cries off his vocal processing unit.

"Megatr--"

"Quiet." Megatron all but purred, sneering, "Watching you squirm is all the stimulation I need. Now...open your port."

By the Allspark...Optimus' head nearly spun at the speed which Megatron moved through this. He fumbled with the panel until it popped off, exposing his vulnerable wiring.

Megatron bent close to his audio.

"Breathe," he whispered.

Then he plunged his fingers into Optimus' wiring, and the Autobot's world rang in flying sparks and binary code. Optimus wrapped one hand around the treads on Megatron's shoulder. He gasped for the air jolted from his intakes while his body screamed for more of...*that*.

A chilling smile tugged Megatron's mouth. He pinched two wires and rolled them around between his thumb and forefinger. Every so often, the tip of his pointed thumb caught on a sensory node that tunneled Optimus' vision. He spoke into his ear, "Is this how you touched yourself, Orion? Or do you do it the way I do, like this..." he *pulled* and Optimus arched completely off the berth. "Ah...I see...well..."

The aching tugs, scrapes and twists continued, leaving Optimus whimpering and pleading for more. His body wasn't his own anymore. He was a puppet and Megatron pulled his strings, and he didn't *care* because it felt so sinfully *good*. And *this* was a much better way to end the war than the alternative.

Optimus tilted his head as Megatron's glossa outlined his intact ear finial. Adoration or lust, he didn't know or worry--he was happy as long as those blissfully amazing fingers kept tugging his wiring. He felt Megatron's exhaled air coming hotter and faster against his ear finial and realized, dully, that his Decepticon companion was trembling with subdued excitement.

Throwing all caution to the wind, he whipped his free hand to the left where it brushed Megatron's inner thigh. It was one of the few places still smooth and purple with paint. The leg moved, granting him full access. He curled his fingers into claws and *dragged*, gritting his teeth at the painful screeching noise.

Megatron's cooling fans sputtered on. He stayed silent, but his jaw dropped in a soundless cry. Optimus ran his tongue over his own front teeth and shifted his hand to the other thigh, repeating the previous motion. Then he stuck his finger into the seam of Megatron's heated codpiece and the Decepticon warlord threw his head back, snarling.

Optimus drank in the sight of Megatron's composure slipping. The tense lines crossing his face were nothing like his usual dour expression.

He gave Megatron a moment to recover--but Megatron used it to shove his fingers deeper into Optimus' access port. They contacted something sensitive, sending static spitting in all directions. Optimus' world went white, and he wasn't even overloading yet.

"*Ohhh!*" he spread his legs, his once-white thighs now dull gray, and arched towards that wonderful

hand. "M-more..."

"You should see your face," Megatron rumbled. His mouth twitched into an enigmatic smile. He leaned over, optics flashing in what was once his battle lust. Perhaps it still was, but the fight was a different one, one he knew he'd win. With his lips against Optimus' audio input sensor, he said, "I imagine your overload will be a show. Don't disappoint me."

Words failed Optimus, and his only attempt to reply came out in a low moan. His body tingled. He couldn't focus on anything beyond the delicious torture occurring between his legs. He'd nearly crossed the point of no return when the fingers withdrew from his buzzing port.

"M-Megatron..." Optimus grabbed his wrist, trying to pull his hand back to its original position.

Megatron shook his hand off and straddled him. He held up the fingers that, a moment ago, had been buried up to the second knuckle in Optimus' cables. They were coated in the oily grease that protected the joints in his lower half during transformation. Megatron looked straight into Optimus' eyes and licked his fingers clean. Then he bent for a kiss. Optimus tasted his own salty-sour fluids on Megatron's lips and tongue. Once, he thought such an act was disgusting...now he found his body throbbing on the verge of overload.

"Mm..." Megatron purred into his audio, "humans have a word for sex. A very vulgar word by their standards. I think I like it more than the pitiful 'making love' you prefer to call it."

In his heated state, Optimus barely formulated a thought. He couldn't remember the word. "W-what word?"

Into his ear, Megatron growled, "Fuck."

Optimus curled his lip as if the language itself sounded sour.

"We're going to *fuck*." Megatron went on, running a finger along the outer edges of Optimus' bottom lip. "Say the word."

Optimus growled at him. Did Megatron want to ruin this? Though, when he thought about it, he couldn't argue very much in his submissive position. "You know I don't like to talk that way."

Megatron grabbed him by the throat, yanked him up and hissed in his ear, "Say the word."

His commanding tone did strange things to Optimus' neural network. To be manipulated and ordered around--mostly with his consent--excited him. He often kept his language clean to be a good example. Swearing was always an uncouth, disgusting thing only Decepticons did. Uttering it just once wouldn't kill him, would it?

"Fine!" he snapped. "Fuck." It was strangely liberating to say something considered forbidden. And, he realized, no gods struck him down. "I said it. Happy?"

Laughing, Megatron slammed him back into the berth. "Do you want to *be* fucked, Orion?"

Optimus almost melted in the heat of that voice whispering in his ear.

"Yes..." he croaked.

"Very well, then."

"Wait."



"What?"

Meeting his former rival's eyes, Optimus asked, "Is there any love involved in this?"

"I wouldn't be about to lose my virginity if I gave myself to the first open port I saw. I have *standards*...hard as that may be for an Autobot to comprehend." A derisive laugh followed the statement, but it sounded like it covered up a mild sting. "I've always believed in waiting for the right one. The irony of this whole situation is that it happens to be you. Now shut up and *enjoy* it."

"Only if I don't wake up your slave."

Megatron laughed. "No."

Optimus' mind was appeased. He smiled, absently stroking Megatron's thighs. This wouldn't be meaningless. Their love wasn't perfect--it was born rough, dented, full of holes and ragged around the edges--but enough materials existed to build a relationship.

The two panels protecting Megatron's port slid apart, letting the circuit boards underneath tilt forward into the open air. They appeared upside-down, the sharp beads of solder jutting out between bare copper wire and tiny coolant lines the diameter of human fingers. A custom job, not natural assembly. He looked down again with something different burning in his eyes. They never relaxed or calmed, they were always a tempest, but this storm had an entirely new meaning that dared the universe to try and stop it.

Optimus saw, through static-laced vision, the way Megatron's face twisted as he brought their ports into full contact. He did not do it slowly or gently, and Optimus gritted his teeth at the sharp solder points jabbing his sensitive circuitry.

Megatron bent over, nose to nose, and his fierce bliss morphed into a most diabolical smile. The circuit board he'd plunged into Optimus retracted halfway, pulling Optimus' wiring taut. Then he bit Optimus' bottom lip without ceremony and began releasing his electrical discharges.

Optimus cried out as his unprepared circuits were bombarded by heat and energy. Was it supposed to hurt?

"What?" Megatron mocked, "Too hot to handle?"

"Sh-sh-shut up..."

It was like nothing Optimus ever felt before. He groaned, slipping his arms around Megatron's waist and pressing their bodies closer. His fingers scratched at his cannon turret and the cannon itself until the little paint left started to peel off in curls around his fingertips. The stinging gave way to something warm and amazing, a feeling he couldn't describe.

"Yesssssss..." Megatron purred in his audio, his voice adding to the excitement of the moment. "I thought you'd like that."

Optimus shoved Megatron's head aside and mouthed his throat. His tongue lolled over dusty cables that dribbled sparks across his lips. The years spent covered in soot, rust and the coolant he sweat through his seams were still there like a rainbow of flavors. His life had a bitter aftertaste that Optimus could only blame himself for.

Static crackled around Optimus' legs. He felt Megatron grab his chin and drag him into another brutal lip lock full of fangs and tongue. His response was swelling and turning inwards. Seeming to sense this, Megatron retracted his access port even further, holding Optimus on a bridge somewhere

between pleasure and agony. He slapped his hands down on the berth beside Optimus' head, swirls and colors dancing within his unfocused optics. Crackling energy flickered around his fangs. Dominating seemed to give him a bigger rush than battle. His eyes twitched and his teeth gnashed together. There wasn't a single sound beyond their hissing intakes struggling for air.

Reaching up, Optimus cupped his former rival's face like a fragile treasure, "Megatron, are you--"

Megatron shook the hand off, snarling. He existed in a plane beyond words and logic. Optimus suddenly realized Megatron was going into overload right in front of him. He was about to reveal himself at his most vulnerable.

Megatron's chest plates separated, exposing his Spark. It pierced the darkness, no longer a sphere, but a multicolored swirl made of many Sparks scaled down to fit within his chamber. For a moment Optimus watched in fascination as the convection took the shape of galaxies and whirlpools, always moving and never quiet.

Nodding, each movement like sloshing into sludge, Optimus parted his inner plating and he saw the same whirling dervish reflected in Megatron's flickering red optics. Wasn't that all they were in the end? A glittering ball of light caught amongst many?

The first trickles of sensation wound themselves into his midsection. He flexed his legs, anticipating, though not as much as he anticipated seeing Megatron's climax. Optimus pulled him down, bringing their halves of the Allspark together.

It hurt at first, as if every lightning bolt ever created struck his chest. Through the fog of static-stars he saw Megatron's optics flare.

"Orion..." Megatron gasped. Spasms wracked his electrified frame, his fingers digging painfully into Optimus' shoulders. Finally, after a long struggle, he gave in and surrendered to his overload. Wounded sounds flowed off his vocal apparatus, moans and whimpers totally opposite to who he was as a person because they were *sogentle*--and everything he felt in the moment flickered across his face. A complete physical, mental and emotional release that left him practically naked.

Optimus never knew Megatron could look like *that*. He yanked him closer so those moans poured directly into his audio sensor. Tingling sensations were billowing throughout his sensory network. In a few seconds, their Sparks would unite and feel as a single entity for the rest of their lives.

He *wanted* it, he *wanted* to unite Cybertron and he *wanted* Megatron.

"So close," Optimus sucked air through his intakes. His systems were so charged that static hummed in his audios.

"*Orion!*" Megatron's cries came louder as his overload reached its peak. The energy building in his system discharged into Optimus, and the past they once knew shattered in waves of moans, cries, memories, the desire to love and overwhelming pleasure.

Optimus let it all go. Everything. All of it. The past, the present, the future, he forgot about it and felt the power of creation crash through his systems. He heard his own voice rising in pitch and volume, and behind the brightening glow around them he vaguely saw Megatron smirking down at him in smarmy satisfaction.

No thinking. Feeling only.

For half a second he lived the lives of every Autobot to walk on Cybertron. People he knew, people he'd never seen before and people who died long before his Spark found a body.

Optimus clawed at Megatron's sides. He felt the acidic death of a solid yellow mech whose arms ended in drills. He felt the brightening light around him. He felt the desperation, the hunger and the hopelessness of a lifetime without ever seeing the stars. He felt Megatron simultaneously hating and loving him. He felt himself coming apart at the seams with grief and hope, starry night skies and Megatron's voice whispering his name. It all collapsed into a pinpoint and burst like a new universe.

He regained his senses to Megatron still watching him curiously. Their eyes remained locked for ages, seeking the mental closeness their bodies experienced a minute ago.

"That," Megatron clicked his tongue, "was the most erotic thing I have ever witnessed."

Tingling and dizzy, Optimus tried to remember how to talk. "Sooo...you aren't disappointed?"

"Tch. You're a fool." Megatron flopped over onto his back. Still attached, Optimus fell with him and landed across his chest.

And Megatron held him.

*Gently.*

"What do you know? Old mechs can learn new tricks."

Optimus snorted at that, but didn't have the strength to pick up his head. One little energon cube hadn't done much for his fuel tanks. They'd both burned all their power. Neither would awaken once they entered recharge. Sleep was death.

Had they succeeded? Would there be an Allspark to return to?

"Hey, Megatron..."

"Hm?"

Optimus lifted his head enough to see Megatron's eyes. "I--"

"No." Megatron kissed him hard, cutting him off. "If there's another side, tell me there."

"And if there isn't?"

Megatron's optics narrowed. His voice sounded exhausted. "I already know what you want to say. It's mutual. Now shut up and die already, I haven't got all day."

That made Optimus snicker. How strange to meet the end of his life in Megatron's arms, *laughing*.

"You shouldn't have given me that cube. I'd be gone right now."

His strength failed him then. He laid his head on Megatron's shoulder, still looking up into his eyes.

"Yes. How foolish of me." Megatron smiled sardonically. "You still burned more energy than I did."

"Mm. Guess that means you win the wager."

"Tch. If we bonded right, we both win."

"I'd like that."

The room seemed a lot dimmer than before. Optimus fought a losing battle to stay awake. He didn't

want Megatron to die alone!

"Megatron."

"Hmmm?"

"I..."

"Don't--"

"--love you."

"You idiot! Couldn't you wait?"

Optimus smiled and shook his head. His world flipped as Megatron rolled over again, using his weight to hold Optimus down. He became slowly aware of a strange tone humming over the silence. Judging by the baffled look on Megatron's face, Optimus wasn't the only one who heard it.

"What's that sound?"

"I don't--"

Dust rose from the grating in the floor like the ashes of a phoenix and coalesced into a smiling blue figure.

***Ero Cybertron iterum oriundus.*** Primus spoke without moving his lips. He spread his arms and golden light poured off his body. "Cybertron will be born again!"

Megatron's eyes glistened when he flashed a smile that glowed almost as brightly as Primus. "We did it."

Hope filled Optimus' tired Spark. He clasped Megatron's hand, grinning back when the light enveloped the room. Reality became pale and fragmented, held together only by the brilliance of rebirth surrounding him...but he was too exhausted to stay awake and watch. He had no energy left. Sleep called his mind, and he didn't fight it because he knew he'd served his purpose.

As he relaxed into recharge, he heard Megatron's voice whisper in his audio, "See you soon, Orion. My Orion..."

The last thing Optimus knew was Primus' arms embracing them both.

## 5: FINALE

Awareness came to him after...he couldn't remember anything...and then it all rushed back.

"...Orion."

He dreamed of the universe as a holo-movie on fast-forward, skipping the mundane. He saw the First Burst that brought Primus into being. Darkness shifted in waves around him. Stars, galaxies and planets speckled the blackness.

"Orion..."

People and places raced by at ridiculous speeds. Everything came to him blurry. It felt as if he just caught up to the universe...or was the universe catching up to him?

"Orion!"

His flickering world crystallized like a liquid lake suddenly becoming solid.

"ORION!"

BANG! BANG!

"*ORION!*"

"Mm?"

He bolted upright to an unfamiliar room, his optics dazzled by sunlight due to a cold startup. Raising a hand to shield his eyes, he swung his white legs over the berth and gazed down at the gold tiled floor beneath his feet.

Who cleaned him? What about...

"*ORION!*"

That voice...it wasn't Megatron. It was too young and high.

Optimus looked around, confused by his surroundings. This...this was his home! His tower high above Cybertron city. He ignored the shouting long enough to gawk at the city spires clearly visible through his floor-to-ceiling windows. What scared him even more was his reflection--he was shorter, his ear finials little more than tiny projections, and his silver face gleamed with youth.

The name being screamed through the door finally registered.

"ORION PAX! If you're overcharged again, I'm not dragging you to the office!"

*I'm...not Optimus?* Optimus...or Orion...stared at his blue hands.

Still hopelessly lost, he blindly keyed the code in the door and it slid away from the stocky red and yellow bot whose mouth was open for another shout. A young face so strange, yet familiar in its handsome roundness greeted his optics.

Orion stared stupidly. Was this real?

"Oh, *finally!*" Hot Shot growled, crossing his arms. "Sheesh! What were you doing in there? Self servicing?" he cocked his head, "Uh...Orion? What's up? Why are you looking at me like that? Is...is everything okay? You look like you're about to cry."

Orion caught Hot Shot up in a tight hug. He couldn't believe it--Hot Shot...alive! How could this be?

"Hot Shot! You're alive! You're...you're all right and alive!"

"Um...yeah...I've been alive for ten thousand years as of yesterday. You were at the party, dancing like a moron all afternoon. Man, what's up with you?"

"This doesn't make any sense." Orion let go of Hot Shot long enough to gawk at his face again. Relief became confusion. A million unanswered questions danced jigs through his head. "What about Cybertron's destruction? Where's Megatron?"

"Who's Megatron?" Hot Shot raised a brow. "Cybertron, destroyed? Ahahaha! Oh, man, Orion! You're funny! You were dreaming, you idiot!"

"No! No, no...it went on for months. *Months*. Everyone was killed. Even Primus himself...how could it all be a dream? I--I was *Prime* for slag's sake! Optimus Prime!"

"Yeah? And my name's Rodimus Prime." Hot Shot rolled his optics. "You ate rust sticks before going to sleep. You always dream about fragged stuff when you do that. Now come ON. You're gonna be late for work!"

Orion's confusion built as he walked with Hot Shot to the monorail station. He didn't hear anything Hot Shot said to him once they climbed into the bullet train and zipped along at several hundred miles per hour. His mind was stuck on Megatron, the mech he'd just started to love before this mess tore them apart. Was Megatron waking up in the mine just as baffled? Did he still remember?

The world around him continued while he stood in its midst as a changed being. He was older, wiser than his surroundings and living in a bubble nobody else seemed to see. Nothing fit right. People seemed oblivious to what they'd lose in the future. Everything smelled too clean. There were too many reflections. Life was an oil drum overflowing, and he longed for the days when he was an empty-headed mech whose world consisted of a line between work, home and the occasional stop in an energon tavern. What he knew had been so simple then. Simple and uncomplicated. Now? The most mindless things around him became needlessly complex and foreign.

Cybertron's spires glistened in the late morning sun. Their opulence seemed gaudy and glaring--why build so high when rows of equally functional bungalows would've done the same with less material?

The thought was exactly like something Megatron would've said. Orion growled at himself. Even the sunlight irritated him because he'd grown so accustomed to near-total darkness. He blinked when he realized he'd missed his sunrise chant by hours.

*Maybe this is the dream*, Orion pondered as cityscapes danced across his glistening optics. He slumped against the window, ignoring the odd look Hot Shot gave him. *That has to be it. I'm dreaming and it'll fade when my body finally loses pow--*

"I'm getting a snack. Want anything?" Hot Shot asked.

Orion shook his head. Something made the train jiggle and he bumped his cheek against the protruding windowsill. It hurt. Dreams weren't supposed to hurt!

*This isn't a dream? Then what IS it?*

The monorail passed the Autobot Academy, where he spotted Scavenger training new recruits on one of the outdoor platforms.

*I know him, but he doesn't know me. Nobody knows me. They don't...* He looked across the monorail where a clump of mechs broke up laughing at a joke whose punch line he just missed. Then he glanced at Hot Shot, who nibbled a rust stick he'd purchased from the vending machine on the wall behind him, *...and you don't, either. Will the memories ever stop? Where do they end? Where does my life begin?*

Orion and Hot Shot arrived at the records office in less than fifteen minutes. They weren't as late as Hot Shot said they were--nobody paid any mind once they walked in. Of course nobody would--his life was *normal*. Orion automatically headed left to his cramped little office at the end of the hall. That's how it always was--routine without thought. Stamp this, mark that, file this under number six.

*I'm trying to be normal. This is my life. This is me living my life as a normal person.*

As the day wore on, his thoughts about the dreary reality he once knew started to fade. Maybe it *was* just a very bad dream. *This* was his life.

He shoved those dark, scented memories into a corner of his mind and locked the door. It worked great in the daytime. But every time he recharged, he dreamed about fangs and sharp fingertips tangling in his wiring. He woke often in the middle of the night to touch himself, his Spark painfully longing for a missing piece of himself he couldn't seem to find.

He never talked about his dreams and tried not to think about them during the day. Dreams never got him anywhere. He had to stay in the real world.

Orion's days returned to a routine within a week. He chanted at dawn--something that gave him more peace now than it ever did--and rolled into his job an hour later. Soon, he didn't even think about anybody named Megatron or a dying Primus. Why give any thought to a dream?

Then he walked into his office to a huge file with the latest energon production statistics stamped on the cover. Orion left it sitting there until he'd filed the insurance paperwork for the buildings being erected across town and checked the backgrounds of twelve new recruits joining the Autobot academy. He could remember his academy days--where he graduated before Scavenger started instructing--and sighed at the requirement for all Autobots to undergo basic military training before venturing off into the field they wished to work in or study. It seemed like the Autobots were training for a war with the Decepticons long before they became a problem.

Red Alert poked his head in, "Morning."

"Good morning!" Orion waved to him. It was hard to look at Red Alert without remembering his disembodied head lying in the dust. "Anything new in the science section?"

"Nothing you'd find interesting." Red Alert replied a bit smugly, "Just an archeology report about strange carvings below the mines."

"Oh." Orion told himself not to ask more because the carvings couldn't possibly be the mysterious doors leading to Cybertron's center. "Well, guess I won't keep you if you're itching to read up."

"Right. I'll see you later." Red Alert nodded ducked back out.

With nothing left to distract him, Orion cycled a breath and flipped open the file. There were

photographs printed on each page. He looked at the miners gathered together, smirking towards the photographer who leaned into the mine to capture their image. Cyclonus, Demolishor and Starscream were easy to pick out, though they were smaller than Orion remembered...and Starscream didn't have wings yet. And in the background, a small, yellow figure with drills on his arms--Twister. Did he get to live, or had he simply not met his fate yet?

Orion turned the page.

Megatron's photo stared straight through him. The Decepticon was standing next to a dim light, clutching the pick axe he'd just thrown over his shoulder while his other hand rested on the wall beside the lamp. He was so *young*, devoid of the age scratches around his eyes. The antennae topping his head like pincers were smooth and his shoulders lacked treads. His coloring was duller, green mixing into the purple around his limbs. He was smirking, cocky, not quite innocent, but not yet a warlord.

Memories rushed around Orion like a river. He remembered walls with images of their lives intertwining. He remembered a war spanning almost an eon. He remembered what *started* the war. Proof was on the next page, which showed the Decepticons' empty energon storage containers.

Empty because the Autobots took it.

At noon, Orion trudged into the break room for some energon and a few rust cookies. As he poured his drink, he remembered Megatron's voice chastising him:

*"No. I get to reap the rewards of your hard work."*

*"Keep digging and you might find a few morsels..."*

He thought of the people under his very feet, slaving away for every drop of the energon in his hand.

Orion shoved it out of his mind again. A dream. He couldn't live in a dream when the real world needed a filing clerk. It'd be too silly to run all the way down to that mine, look for Megatron and not be recognized.

And so, for the next century, Orion continued with his desk job and tried not to think about Megatron. Life ran smooth until the evening he activated his holo-set and saw Megatron's face next to a burning energon dispenser.

It all started with that news story. Destiny's landslide into inevitability had begun.

Orion tried not to care. There was no way to change it.

By morning, people around his filing office started talking about a mysterious council searching for the new Autobot leader, and that the Matrix of Leadership was being passed around to see which mech had the purest Spark for the job. Orion cringed each time he heard the rumor. The end of his life as he knew it continued its inexorable approach. Being completely unable to avoid it made the wait nearly unbearable.

Once upon a time, receiving the Matrix of Leadership was the greatest day of Orion Pax's life. To be the one chosen from millions to lead his people to freedom against the terrible, war-hungry Decepticons. But now--with his mind full of another life whose path seemed to lead in exactly the same direction--he viewed the hours leading up to being discovered as a countdown to his execution.

Only one good thing came of the riots: Megatron's name. People started to hear and recognize it.



The night before he'd be called to accept the Matrix, Orion daringly skirted the nightly riot-control curfew and walked the empty streets. He hoped he'd catch Megatron, but the Decepticon remained elusive. Approaching patrol vehicles forced him back towards his apartment. The sensation of ruddy eyes watching followed Orion all the way back to his lofty sanctuary, finally fading when he'd closed his front door.

Orion got no rest that night. Dreams were his only comfort and they chose tonight, of all the nights in his life, to elude him. For the first time since he woke up to this new life, he mourned his dreams. He mourned so deeply that he rolled onto his stomach and cried inconsolably until his internal wake-up alarm went off.

Would staying in bed change his destiny?

*No...they'd just come to the apartment. Stalling won't do me any good. I might as well get up and start my last day as Orion Pax.*

The next hour found him staring blearily at his reflection in the cloistered tower, waiting for his cue to chant. Megatron was probably down on the ground right now, listening. He would return tomorrow to silence and regret.

That morning, tacitly, Orion sang for Megatron and no one else. He wove music and prayers while begging Primus to let this burden pass...but his prayer went unanswered. Mechs decked in golden armor and Primus-like crowns collected him the moment he exited the tower. None spoke when they loaded him into an armored transport vehicle.

"I'm not the right person for th--"

One of the golden mechs spoke, "The Matrix, and through it, Primus, will decide that. Leadership is given, not chosen."

Orion hung his head. He knew they'd cover it with a bag at the halfway point so he'd never see the actual location of the Matrix. When that moment came, he found the darkness strangely comforting and familiar. He spent the journey in a dreamless recharge so deep that time couldn't reach him.

"Orion," one of the mechs gently woke him. "We're here."

It wasn't until he felt the bag whipped off his face that a realization came to him: Maybe leadership wasn't his decision. But what he did with it? What he chose to do once he became Prime?

*I still have a choice.*

Orion kept his head low while the gold mechs led him down a large corridor lit only by squat halogen lamps set against the blackened walls. The Matrix of Leadership was lying on a white dais in the next room. Its multicolored light danced over Orion's face when he leaned over to study it.

Nobody said a word. It was so silent that every whirring servo became cacophonous.

Orion glanced over his shoulder at the gold figures standing behind him. Their faces expressed nothing, their shadowed optics following his every movement. He faced forward again, staring into his destiny. Megatron would laugh at him for stalling.

"You know, this would look better on my wall than in my chest."

Stony silence. If anything, the two guards rolled their eyes. Orion bit back an inappropriate snicker at their expense. His brief amusement faded when he realized he couldn't dawdle forever.

With silent torment roiling in his mind, Orion grasped the handles of the Matrix and lifted it off the dais. He held it above his head as its energy fields read his Spark, and its central jewel glowed brilliant white in acceptance. Primus' voice welcomed him into his new life.

When this moment came a lifetime ago, Orion cried joyful tears. This time...he mourned.

The raw power knocked him offline, and he knew the next time he woke he would no longer be Orion Pax.

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Optimus Prime's optics were blind to the ceremony held in his honor. His ears were deaf to the music and well-wishers filing by to see--or as he preferred to think of it--gawk at the new Prime. Being stuck in an overly ornate chair and polished to a high, royal shine didn't do any wonders for his dark mood. The Autobot people were glorifying what they believed to be the answer to the Decepticon menace. They thought erasing an entire race of energon and metal Cybertronians like themselves was the answer to all the violence. Not a single person questioned the upcoming fight or said anything about trying to understand the people they were fighting with.

*"Per Primus electus"* had been engraved all over the backing of Optimus' throne.

*Per Primus electus.*

Chosen by Primus.

He did not question his battle mask this time around. He didn't question anything because no answers were forthcoming. The plating over his nose and mouth made his expression nearly unreadable. Faking smiles wasn't necessary. He could just nod his head and people were satisfied.

*But I'd give my left arm for a giant cube of gourmet grade energon right now.* He waved to another group passing by. *This is so wrong!*

Optimus had many hours to think while he sat there in his self-loathing prison. Chosen by Primus...*chosen by Primus.* Chosen. *Choice.*

His mind reeled with memories of hands on his grill and dangerous fangs scratching his throat. Would the mechs around him still think him a grand leader if he fondled himself to overload while they watched? Would they look up to him if they knew the impure, sacrilegious thoughts crossing his mind?

*Choice.*

In his last lifetime, he worried needlessly about whether anybody would follow him. The people were like those fluffy white herding creatures from Earth.

He had a *choice* because the Autobots wanted a figurehead to lead them against the filthy pariahs from underground. They wanted a quick solution. Decepticons scared them. They didn't understand *why* the Decepticons attacked, so everyone wanted them *gone*. Hypocrisy was a poison infecting the masses with each new riot. It had to stop!

And as he sat there in his regal chair, armed with knowledge from another distant lifetime, Optimus Prime realized the plan Primus had for him.

It all boiled down to a single choice.

Following the ceremony was a long meeting discussing the riots, the miners and how those loathsome Decepticons shouldn't be allowed amidst Autobot opulence. Optimus gritted his teeth as the grating voices of people he wasn't supposed to know said the same things Megatron chastised him for. Did any of them ever spend a week without the sun and see the horrible oppression they wanted him to enforce?

The worst part was knowing he let their opinions color his own. He let their choices become his. He would not repeat that mistake.

"Enough!" Optimus slammed his hands down on the tabletop. He'd moved so suddenly the entire office around him shook. Jetfire, who'd just walked in, looked at him like he grew eight heads.

"Why are we in such a hurry to destroy the Decepticons?"

"They're 'cons! Isn't that reason enough?" someone muttered.

"Yeah," someone else agreed.

Optimus glared. "If you lived in their living conditions, you'd want to fight for a better life. They live in filth. They're always dirty, tired, hot and hungry. They hardly have five minutes to mourn when someone dies down there!"

"Optimus, sir..." It was Red Alert who spoke up from the far end of the table, "They are the ones who started attacking us."

"Yes. But they wouldn't have a reason to if we just welcomed them. Will it kill anybody if they had a little extra dirt to sweep up? Why not offer them places to clean up, rather than treat them like they have a plague?"

Before anyone got a word in, he went on, "The Matrix chose me. I've seen what they live in. I see why they fight. I will *not*, I repeat, will *not* go to war against people whose only crime is to come from poorer conditions than ours. We need to welcome them. We need to understand them. They fight because we won't let them better themselves. Now, I want the weapons in the streets removed and replaced with energon stations. I want cleaning booths on every street corner if necessary. I want them to walk freely amongst us." He looked around, taking in the frightened, horrified expressions of his men, and smiled behind his mask. "I'll be in the center of town tomorrow, welcoming the Decepticons as equal members of society. Anybody who fires a weapon without my order will be arrested. By the way--I will be repeating this speech where the Decepticons can hear it."

"But, Opti--"

Still impassioned, Optimus continued in a softer tone, "If we go in fighting, we won't be any better than they are. We must show them there are ways to settle this without weapons or fists. They're fighting for freedom and dignity. What right do we have to deny them that? So if they come in fighting..."

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"...let's greet them with peace. Resist until they calm down. Then we'll open our audios and hear them out. So here we are. Talk to us. We're listening."

Optimus fell silent then, his gaze sweeping over the cold faces of a Decepticon group gathered in the city square to hear him talk. They stood out like relics in a museum, most of them still covered in mine filth and brandishing tools like weapons. Even the few who did accept a thorough cleaning could be picked out from the Autobots around them because of their exotic faces and frowning

mouths.

The smell of dankness and dust was achingly familiar.

"We don't need to fight." Optimus continued. "I don't want to fight you. If you don't want to work with the Mini-Cons, you don't have to. You can come up here and find a job. You won't be turned away."

"What about education?" one of them shouted. "Some of us can't even read!"

Optimus turned to the screeching voice. He stilled.

It was Twister.

"You will have it," he said, slowly smiling behind his mask. "You have the same rights as anyone else standing here."

The cheer his words incurred nearly left him deaf. He covered his audios, laughing, but couldn't avoid the stinging disappointment that Megatron didn't emerge to hear this speech. Hopefully he was somewhere nearby, listening. Even if he didn't remember, and even if Twister still living happened to be a fluke, Optimus told himself he'd corrected his greatest regret by preventing the war. Autobots and Decepticons would exist together in peace.

And he'd live the rest of his life aching with memories.

Hot Shot and the other Autobots split up to operate the various fuel and cleaning stations situated along the street. Decepticons flocked to both, eager to wash off the mines and consume the first full meals of their lives. Even Mini-Cons were welcome to partake, and did so in great numbers.

It wasn't easy. Dirty looks were shared, but no weapons or fists followed.

Optimus declared it all good and departed for the Primusian cathedral. He had some thanking to do.

"Hey, Optimus!" Hot Shot called just before Optimus made his escape.

"Huh?"

The young bot rubbed at his nose and smiled. "Guess your dream wasn't so crazy after all, was it?"

"No," the Autobot leader shook his head, "But I'm glad I had it."

"Where 'ya heading?"

"Away. I need some time alone."

"Oh...okay."

"Save a few rust sticks for me, would you please?"

Hot Shot's eyes flickered. He nodded and rushed back to his station.

Optimus transformed and drove the half-hour trek to the Primusian cathedral. The sun was setting, causing light to dance like flames across the golden spires. His chanting tower stood like a sentinel against the deep blue sky. The inside was just as grand--walls of solid gold covered in carvings depicting Creation and the mathematical formula for calculating the age of Cybertron. A fantastic titanium statue of Primus watched over the entire sanctuary. Ironic...it was exactly the same size as

the body Optimus saw die so long ago.

Paying no attention to the presence of the priest slipping in behind him, he walked up to the statue, looked it in the eye and retracted his mask.

"Primus," he said. "I figured it out. You won't suffer this time around. Thank you for giving me a choice and--"

Tapping footsteps shifted and departed, but their weight didn't sound anything like a priest's slow, quiet walk. Their proud cadence sent Optimus' mind reeling back in time to a desolate world teetering on its own destruction. He let himself recall it all--the grief, the journey, the longing and the reflection of himself he almost couldn't face.

His head jerked up. A familiar shadow shrank down the long aisle.

And now that reflection was walking away. Did it remember? Did it ache inside the way he did?

Optimus spun to look behind him. Megatron's retreating cannon barrel gleamed against the sunset, his shadow stretching along the golden floor as the sun sank behind the horizon. His clean, polished body shone like a dream against the glare.

"Megatron!"

Megatron stopped by the ornate columns marking the center of the cathedral. He turned around to look Optimus in the eyes, his optics two cold and fathomless gems shimmering against his gray face. He'd been cleaned, but not *too* clean--the dusty miner scent clung to him like a memory wafting throughout the sanctuary. He looked out of place amidst the surrounding grandeur.

"Megatron," Optimus finally reached his side. He felt his Spark throbbing in his throat. The familiarity hurt. Every breath he gasped for pleaded with destiny.

Megatron's expression didn't change. He stared at Optimus for ages, his face utterly blank. Then, slowly, he curled his lip in a fang-baring grin.

"Hello, Orion," he whispered.

Time stood still for an instant.

Optimus' Spark rejoiced to the colorful sparkle of fireworks being shot off outside. He wanted to dance down the aisle, shouting that it wasn't all wasted. He wanted to cry out, to sing, to scream, but he stored all the energy in his arms and used it pull Megatron close in a warm embrace.

"Megatr--"

Suddenly, he found himself pressed to the column behind him, Megatron's lips assaulting his mouth in sparkling sensation. The kiss was the answer he'd been hoping for. He languished in its completeness, tasting, feeling and desiring, before kissing back with utmost gentleness. This was a benediction that Megatron didn't seem to understand--Optimus didn't expect him to--but he'd learn.

He'd *learn*.

Then, all at once, Megatron stepped back and smirked. "Feel free to join me when you pick your jaw up off the floor. I hear there's a heck of a party in Cyber Square."

He flashed that razor sharp smile of his and resumed his long walk towards the door, leaving

Optimus to gasp for the breath cycles stolen from him. His manner, the way he walked and how he talked hadn't changed. He was still the Megatron Optimus remembered in their last life.

But *this* time they weren't hiding from themselves. They weren't afraid of their reflections. Everything was right in the world around them. They had the materials and a place to build their love. All they needed was time, which now existed for them in abundance.

Optimus ducked his head with a grin. His optics took in the Ancient text carved on the reflective tile beneath his feet--

*Pacis venio ut bellum nunquam est.*

"Peace is the war that never happened."

--and glanced up at Primus' statue. As long as he lived, he'd swear it turned its head to smile back at him.

*I did it right this time, didn't I? This is how it's supposed to happen. Thanks, Primus. Thanks a lot.*

"Orion? Save it for your chant tomorrow! I'll be listening from the congregation. Now hurry up, or the party will be over before we arrive!"

Megatron's familiar voice jolted Optimus to reality. He leaned back in awe, realizing just how much had changed. Their experience brought Megatron to the church, and without the war in the way he was free to come in and pray any time he wanted. They could have their bond blessed by the priests, and doing so would symbolically unite the Autobots and Decepticons as equals.

But right now? Optimus looked forward to a handful of rust sticks and a cube of gourmet grade energon.

"Today, please."

"We have all night. What's the rush?" Optimus laughed at the glare shot his way. "All right, all right! I'm coming."

He bowed towards Primus' statue before rushing down the aisle to catch up with Megatron. Their shadows became one as they stepped out the door and into the ruddy brilliance of their new future.

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